

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

PHILEMON 1

A British newspaper once ran a contest with the winner receiving a substantial cash prize. The money went to the best answer to the question: "*What is the shortest way to London?*" The winning answer was "*The shortest way to London is with good company!*"

Long trips are more fun when you travel with friends.

And the same is true on our journey through life.

As I look back on my life, what matters most to me isn't my accomplishments, but the friendships I made in the pursuit of those accomplishments. You can measure a person's wealth by counting their friends.

Yet true, lasting friendships require commitment and hard work. Actress Susan Saint James once gave the following description, "*Friendship is like putting on pantyhose. You get one foot in and then the other, and wiggle around and tug until you get it right, then pretty soon you say 'I love these pantyhose - they fit!'*"

Rest assured, I have zero experience squeezing into a pair of pantyhose, *but I've had fun watching my wife.*

I've seen that it requires flexibility and adjustment, *some give and take.* And it's only after quite a bit of effort that they fit. **The same is true with friendship.**

Paul the apostle demonstrates the value he places on friendship and his willingness to work at those friendships in his letter to a pal named, "*Philemon.*"

Verse 1, “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother...” There are Christians who have a ministry of writing letters *to prisoners*. Well, the book of Philemon is a letter *from a prisoner* named Paul.

He was in Rome. Paul was incarcerated for His faith and was waiting to stand trial before Caesar Nero.

Paul wrote three other *letters* during his *lock up*: Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Along with Philemon these four letters are appropriately called “The Prison Epistles.” The letters to Philemon and the Colossians were delivered by Paul's friend Tychicus.

Paul writes “to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer...” Notice, Paul's friendship with Philemon was forged as a “*fellow laborer*” for the Lord.

You could call them “*old army buddies*.” They fought many a spiritual battle together in the Lord’s Army.

They say soldiers - *men who've fought shoulder to shoulder - shared a foxhole - been on the front lines side-by-side - forge deep and durable* friendships.

There’s something about the rigors of combat that draw men together. They learn to communicate, stay united, trust each other, cover each other’s back.

And I believe the best way to make friends is to get involved laboring for the Lord. When you share the *joys and jolts* of spiritual service with another person, a special bond begins to form - a real friend develops!

This letter was also addressed “to the beloved Apphia...” Probably Philemon's wife. And “Archippus our fellow soldier...” He seems to be Philemon's son.

And apparently, the son followed in *his father's footsteps...* for he too was a fellow soldier of the faith.

“And to the church in your house...” Philemon may've been a wealthy man - with a large, spacious home.

Apparently, he opened his doors and offered his house as a meeting place for the church at Colossi. Philemon and his family were hospitable to the saints.

Realize the Church met in the homes of its members for the first 275 years of its existence. Its most successful period of growth and expansion occurred when fellowships of believers were based in homes.

Acts 2:46-47 describe the habits of the infant church in Jerusalem, “So continuing daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved...” Notice the combination...

The believers met in the Temple or in a large corporate gathering... yet they also met from house to house, in more-intimate, more-personal settings.

Always remember nowhere in the New Testament does the word “*church*” ever refer to a building. We, *the people* - the followers of Jesus - are the church.

Like the fellow who complained to the pastor that the kids were wearing hats in the sanctuary. The pastor corrected him, "No the sanctuary is wearing a hat."

It's *believers* not *bricks* that make a church. We all enjoy meeting in a comfortable building, but a building is a luxury. The type of building we meet in is irrelevant.

Jesus reiterated this in Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them." Always remember a building is a *convenience* - not a *requirement*.

Also don't miss the hospitality that's shown here by Philemon and his family. They opened their home and lives to a church... *A Sunday School class might've met in Archippus' bedroom... Apphia cleaned house constantly... Ladies used her kitchen for pot-lucks...*

Yet they gladly opened their home to the church.

Our church started in a home. My home was our initial gathering ground, and it put a definite burden on a newlywed bride named Kathy. People were coming and going constantly... *Bible Studies, meetings, hanging out..* Kathy shared her house with a church.

I have no doubt that in Kathy's mind as well as in Philemon's mind *his family* included *his church*. The church in Colossi was one big extended family.

And I believe this kind of hospitality is especially vital in an age where the extended family is practically nonexistent. Modern mobility has broken up families.

We used to be surrounded by mom and dad, grandpa and grandma, brothers and sisters - a family network provided support, encouragement, and expertise.

Today we miss this sort of community - and as a result there's a lot more lonely people in the world who feel as if their lives don't really matter to anyone else.

If you haven't plugged into a church, you need to do so! We all need an extended family - a group to which we belong - a place where we can call home.

God didn't design us to live alone. Isolation isn't healthy. God wired humans for community. He desires for us to live in meaningful friendship with other people.

In fact, *did you know that "hospitality" is a spiritual gift?* When we think of supernatural gifts, we think of healing, or prophecy, or miracles. But 1 Peter 4:9 adds **"hospitality"** to the list, **"Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."** We need folks in our church with a supernatural knack for making other people feel welcome and including them into the group.

In verse 3, Paul greets Philemon and family, **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers..."** Notice the Apostle Paul prayed for his friends. In almost every letter he wrote, he let his friends know he was praying for them...

The most important favor you do for a friend is to pray for them, and **the next most important favor** you can do is to let them know you're praying for them!

What a comfort to have someone who cares enough about you to intercede with God on your behalf.

Verse 5, **“hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...”** Paul was a good friend to Philemon, but Philemon was quite a friend himself. It's one thing to display love and faith in the Lord - it's quite another matter to display love and faith toward another person.

Yet this is what constitutes true friendship - it's finding someone who loves you enough to risk trusting you. He or she is willing to go out on a limb for you.

It's difficult to trust another human. Friendship makes you vulnerable. Inevitably, you'll be disappointed, but the benefits of a real friend are worth the risk.

Philemon and Paul had learned to trust each other in the midst of the battles they'd fought together. They knew from firsthand experience they could count on the other for cover when the bullets started to fly.

Remember Tonto's name for the Lone Ranger? It was ***"Kemosabe"*** - *and do you know what it means?*

“Faithful friend...” The Lone Ranger and Tonto were in so many scrapes together over the years. Through all the episodes, they learned to depend on each other.

Verse 6, “That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.” Paul prays that other people will notice Philemon's godly life, so that his sharing of the Gospel will become more effective.

Paul knows that *a life full of good works is always more impressive than a mouthful of good words.*

Sometimes we'll share our faith with someone and just assume they should listen. But first we need to earn the right to be heard - *be a friend, show our love* - then they'll be more inclined to listen to our message.

“For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.” Apparently, Philemon was a winsome person. He was a refreshing personality to be around.

Anyone close to Philemon benefited from his friendship. He radiated joy. He was a great encourager.

There are actually two types people in the world...

First, there are those folks who are enthusiastic about life - they love living - they're optimistic - and they encourage you to have the same attitude. They look on the bright side of things. They're full of faith and hope.

Every time you're around this kind of person, you get your spiritual battery charged. You walk away blessed.

But there are people who are just the opposite.

They're spiritual leeches - spiritual scavengers. They act like parasites. They feed off of other people. They tend to drain your battery rather than recharge it.

These folks are always pessimistic, complaining, negative. Invariably, they focus only on themselves.

And frankly, you hate to be around them. They walk around as if a cloud of gloom hangs over their head. **What kind of person are you - a *light* or a *leech*?**

"What good did it do to be grouchy today? Did your surliness drive any trouble away? Did you cover more ground than you usually do - because of the grouch you carried with you? If not, what's the use of a grouch or a frown - if it won't smooth a path - or a grim trouble drown? If it doesn't assist you, it isn't worthwhile. Your work may be hard, but just do it and smile!"

It's been said, **"A long face will do a lot to shorten a list of friends."** I have no doubt Philemon *had* many friends, because he was a good friend to *have*!

You can make more friends in two months by being interested in other people than you can in twenty years trying to get other people interested in you!

Once a man made scores of friends by changing just one word in his vocabulary. For years, every time he heard someone make a comment he responded, **"aw, *baloney*."** But he replaced **"*baloney*"** with **"*amazing*."**

Now whenever someone makes a comment, he responds, **"*amazing*"** - and he has lots more friends.

Did you know there's a vitamin you can take that produces friends? B-1. There's an old saying, "I went out to find a friend, but could not find one there. I went out to be a friend, and friends were everywhere!"

Verse 8, "Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you - being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ - I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains..." Apparently, a divine appointment had taken place in Paul's prison cell...

Has God ever booked you a divine appointment?

You just happened to bump into a person you weren't expecting to see. It seemed accidental at the time, but later you realized God had arranged the encounter. Without you being aware of His intervention, God orchestrated a divine connection.

The rabbis have a saying, "Coincidence is not a kosher word." It's true. There're no accidents with God.

Realize, Onesimus had been Philemon's slave. And any time we think of slavery we recoil in horror.

One of the pictures that stick in our minds is the cruel Egyptian taskmasters who built their pyramids by forcing the Hebrews to make bricks without straw.

Or defenseless Africans being packed onto crowded slave ships - then taken to the new world and sold to white landowners by European traders. Plantation slavery was shockingly evil - totally reprehensible.

Today, we hear of cruel and evil men who make slaves of young girls and employ them in sex trade. *And we should do all we can to end this evil in our day.*

Yet in some cultures, slavery was a far more benevolent practice. In ancient Hebrew society, slavery actually served as an alternative to debtor's prison.

If you fell behind financially, you could work off your obligation. Rather than file bankruptcy, slavery was a way you could climb out of an insurmountable hole.

Philemon was not a vile, exploitive slave trader. Paul commends him for his love, and kindness, and faith.

He was a Christian businessman, helping a neighbor pay off some debt and regain his financial freedom.

But Onesimus had failed to appreciate Philemon's concern. He had begrudged his servitude and copped an attitude from day one. Onesimus could always be counted on to poison the soup... He stole from his boss. Worked as little as he could. Was a rebel-rousing troublemaker. Finally, he jump ship and ran away...

Onesimus flew the coup. He wanted to get as far as possible from all that was familiar. So Onesimus boards a boat and sails 900 miles from the country town of Colossi to the big city of Rome. There he figures he can get lost in the crowd - *or so he thought.*

But a strange chain of events occurred in Rome.

Imagine one night, a haughty Onesimus strolling into the local Hooters to celebrate his newfound freedom.

He downs one too many beers, and makes a pass at a waitress who's boyfriend happens to see him. He ends up in brawl. He gets arrested and tossed in jail.

The next day, Onesimus is shaking off a hangover, when he opens his eyes - and irony of all ironies, he's in the same prison cell as Philemon's buddy, Paul.

This story reminds me of three college students in Key West. After purchasing some pot, they found a secluded cluster of trees next to a building and thought no one would see them smoking their stash.

What they didn't realize is they were sitting under the air-conditioning intakes of the local police station.

Inside, the cops noticed heavy marijuana fumes coming through the vents. *The students were busted.*

They tried to hide from the authorities. Instead, they ran right into them. This was Onesimus. He tried to run from responsibilities, instead he ran smack into them.

You can imagine what happened next. God used His servant Paul to break the runaway's rebellious heart.

By end of the morning, Onesimus had seen his need for Jesus, and had opened his heart to the Gospel.

As Paul puts it in verse 10, "*Onesimus... I have begotten while in my chains.*" Paul had a new spiritual son. Onesimus had been born again by God's Spirit.

That's why Paul now writes to his buddy Philemon and asks him to take back Onesimus - *as a brother.*

But what about Philemon? The story has a happy twist for Onesimus, but he was wrong to run. He had a debt to pay. Onesimus had an obligation to Philemon.

In fact, his AWOL now made his situation worse.

Under Roman Law, a run-away slave was a wanted man. The master registered his name and description with the authorities. If caught, he could sentence the slave to death... There's actually a record of one man, who upon retrieving his slave, threw him into a pool of man-eating fish. Paul loved Onesimus. The thought of harm coming to him was tough for Paul to swallow.

So he takes up scroll and quill and goes to bat for Onesimus. Paul appeals to Philemon to take him back.

But notice how Paul makes his appeal. He doesn't use his authority - *instead his appeal is based on love.*

Once, Dwight Eisenhower was explaining two types of leadership. He put a string on the table and pushed one end. He failed to move it where he wanted. But then he pulled the string and controlled it precisely.

And people are like strings... Folks don't like to be pushed. They respond best to love. This is why Paul doesn't *push* Philemon, he *pulls* on his heartstrings...

Paul could've ordered Philemon. Notice, he calls himself, "*Paul, the aged*" - he was 30 years an apostle.

Paul was a spiritual heavyweight, yet his style wasn't pushy. He wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus **not because he had to, but because he wanted to.**

Be careful when you push a friend and start demanding. You never get far ordering people around.

When you begin to push and force people and figure they owe you - *the ole "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours routine..."* - that's not the Jesus' style.

A true friend relies - not on browbeating, or guilt trips, or pressure tactics, or pay backs - but on love.

Learn to love with no strings attached. The best way to preserve a friendship is to avoid forcing a friend.

Paul continues his appeal in verse 11. He says of Onesimus, *"who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me."* Here's a word play...

The name *"Onesimus"* means *"profitable."*

Paul is saying that Philemon's slave has not been very *Onesimus*. He's been more a *headache* than a *help*, but now Jesus has made him *a real Onesimus*.

Jesus takes unprofitable people and makes them spiritually profitable, and productive, and fruitful...

Verse 12, *"I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary."*

Paul loved Onesimus. Philemon's slave was now his friend. Paul would've liked Onesimus to stay in Rome and assist him in ministry, but it was right to send him home. Onesimus had

an obligation to Philemon. And part of repentance is fulfilling our responsibilities.

If Onesimus were to help Paul, it would need to be Philemon's choice. Once Onesimus returns to Colossi and makes things right with his master, then Philemon can decide what's next for Paul's new friend.

I think it's interesting to note Paul's concern that any help he receive be voluntary - not out of compulsion.

And this should be true of all our gifts to God.

2 Corinthians 9:7 reads, "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." God wants us to serve and give to Him from our hearts - not because *we have to*, but because *we want to!* He loves a cheerful giver.

When we *do for God* or *give to God* with a grudge, He considers a tainted sacrifice. We learn from the OT that God was insulted when his people offered less than their best. God expects the pick of the litter - the first of the flock. The best gifts are prompted by love.

Paul continues, verse 15, "For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave - a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Philemon should see the hand of God in this turn of events and see his slave, Onesimus, in a new light, *no longer a slave, but now a "beloved brother" in the Lord.*

It is interesting that the Church in the NT made no attempt to abolish the institution of slavery. They didn't adopt a political agenda and become social activists. Nor did they campaign for governmental change.

Certainly most examples of Roman slavery were horrendous and needed to come to an end. Such slavery was cruel, immoral, and anti-Christian, but you never see the Church out picketing the slave markets.

1 Corinthians 7 instructs new believers who were slaves to remain loyal slaves unless they were freed.

In modern times, we seem to think that everything can be cured through legislation. We assume social change occurs when old laws are stricken and replaced with new laws. But let's admit, *though there's no longer slavery in our society, how are we doing with racism?* **No set of laws can alter the human heart!**

This is what the early Christians realized.

Problems like slavery, abortion, and poverty are just symptoms of deeper spiritual issues. If sin is only dealt with on **a social level** the problem won't be solved.

It has to be dealt with on **a spiritual level** - in the heart of the individual. And rather than rely on *a political process* or *social protest* - Paul knew the best way to change people's hearts was to preach the Gospel and rely on God's Spirit to effect the change.

Of course Paul didn't live in a democratic society, *but he didn't even try to abolish slavery in the church.*

Instead, **Paul relied on love.** He knew *legislative power* was like a wet noodle next to the *power of love!*

As I said earlier, slavery has long been abolished on the books - *yet humans still oppress other humans.*

Bigotry and exploitation and cruelty still abound.

People who are supposedly free still get exploited, and controlled, and manipulated by folks who are smarter or more powerful. The problem will be with us, until the *root of sin* is uprooted from the *heart of man.*

But there's an even deeper lesson in this wonderful story. There's a *symbolic, spiritual message* in Paul's plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. For just as Paul interceded for Onesimus, Jesus intercedes for us!

In a sense, we're all runaway slaves, unprofitable to God. In Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Philemon, he wrote, "**All of us are Onesimuses!**"

We departed for awhile, but only to be received back forever!... And no longer just as slaves, *but more!...* as brothers of our Lord! We're now joint-heirs with Jesus.

Certainly, we're slaves or servants of Christ, but Galatians 4 tells us we're more than just *slaves to God*, we're *sons*. Our place is not only at the Master's feet, but around His table. We're His kids, and He wants us to *enjoy His presence* and *gobble up His provisions.*

I love how Paul intercedes on behalf of Onesimus.

In verse 17, he tells Philemon, “If then you count me as a partner, receive him (the Greek word means “receive him into your family circle.”) as you would me.”

Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus as family.

And verse 18, “But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. Paul will pay any damages. Whatever Onesimus owed Philemon in debt or lost revenue, Paul would pay it from his own wallet.

Paul loved his friend enough to put his money where his mouth was! He’ll sacrifice a few *bucks* for a *brother*.

Notice what Paul did for Onesimus is a picture of what Christ has done for us. **Man has two problems...**

First, we cannot live up to God's standard.

Second, we cannot pay our own debt of sin.

On **the asset side** of life’s ledger, we lack enough merit to gain God's favor. And on **the liability side**, we owe far too much than we could ever begin to pay off.

But Christ, *the Accountant of Grace*, has the answer!

In verse 17, He tinkers with **the asset side** - “*receive him as you would me.*” He adds the wealth, and righteousness, and stature of Christ to our account.

Just as Philemon is encouraged to accept Onesimus as he would Paul - the Father God in Heaven promises to receive us just as He receives His own Son, Jesus.

In Christ, when I approach God, I’m assured of His acceptance because He promises to treat me as He treats

Jesus. I've been received into the family circle. I can approach boldly to the throne of God's grace!

And in verse 18, Jesus works on **the liability side** - *"if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account"* for just as Paul agreed to cover Onesimus' debts, Jesus promises to cover of our spiritual liability.

On the cross, Jesus placed our sin on His shoulders. He took over our payments and cleared all our debt!

Jesus' last words from the cross was *"It is finished."* In the original Greek language, the phrase reads, *"Te Telestai."* It was an accounting term seen commonly in ledgers of Jerusalem businesses. It meant, *"paid in full."* When Jesus died on Calvary's cross, all that needed to be done was done for us to be saved!

The story of Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon paints a beautiful picture of the salvation Jesus has offered us!

Verse 19, *"I, Paul, am writing with my own hand."*

Paul's signature at the bottom of the letter doubled as a promissory note. He puts the transaction in writing. He wants his promise to Philemon to be legal.

And this is why Jesus came under the Law and went to the cross, to pay sin's penalty... This is why our debt couldn't be glossed over - it all had to be done legally!

Sin had to be blotted out and righteousness imputed according to the proper spiritual legalities. God does business by the book! His signature is on our salvation.

And Paul adds, “I will repay - not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.”

Here, Paul proves he’s still human - for in verse 19, he basically contradicts everything he’s just taught us.

He finally throws his weight around. Just in case love doesn't prompt Philemon to do the right thing - Paul reminds his friend that he possesses plenty of clout.

In essence, Paul is saying, “Remember Philemon, ole buddy, you'd be going to hell if it wasn't for me.”

Apparently, Philemon owed his salvation to the ministry and preaching of the Apostle Paul. Paul is reminding his former convert *that he owes him one!*

We probably ought to excuse Paul for this one example of heavy-handedness. All-in-all Paul handles what was a delicate situation with tender loving care.

I've heard it said, "A friend is someone who can step on your toes without messing up your shine." That characterizes the friendship Paul showed Philemon.

Verse 20, “Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.” 1 Corinthians 13:7 tells us, "(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, love never fails." Paul expected Philemon to do what was right.

We all need someone who believes in us and has high expectations for us. It inspires us to do our best.

It's said, "A friend is someone who thinks you're a good egg even though you're slightly cracked."

Verse 22, "But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you." Paul is planning a visit to Colossi and invites himself to stay at Philemon's house. Apphia can add another house guest to her busy schedule.

Verse 23, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." And with these few personal greetings Paul closes his letter to Philemon.

But let me challenge us with a few closing thoughts. Here's a question, "What kind of a friend are you?"

Are you a "faithful friend" - a *Kemosabe in Christ*? Or does real friendship sound like too much hard work?

I hope we all realize that when God called us to be His kids, *though we may not have known it at the time*, He was also calling us to be brothers and sisters!

And I have no doubt that in light of eternity a brother is **certainly worth the bother!** Let's cultivate good friendships... Let's be deliberate and considerate, and make our fellowship the very best that it can be!