



Light from the Word

Philemon: Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Editor's note: this month begins a four-part series of teachings from some of the shortest books of the Bible; Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude.

*“Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.”*¹

The Apostle Paul ends the letter to Philemon with a blessing, desiring that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ would be with the spirit of Philemon. This key element of a Christ-led born-again spirit is essential to understand the concepts that Paul addressed in his epistle, and was essential to Paul's confidence that Philemon would be obedient. Paul's instruction encourages us along with Philemon to make our faith more effective, respond to reasonable requests from brethren, and to receive those whom the Lord has forgiven. Paul's example teaches us to request rather than demand, to intercede on behalf of others, to work together in mutual esteem, and to see the potential for good in others. These Spirit-led actions foster reconciliation and have the power to restore the most damaged of relationships.

The soul that has been redeemed by the mercy and grace of Jesus has a perspective that influences every relationship. One who comprehends the profound forgiveness extended by Jesus is not only able, but compelled to extend profound forgiveness to others. One who finds himself served by the Lord and Master of all is able to in turn serve others. One who experiences the joy of reconciliation is willing to offer reconciliation to others. Knowing that Philemon was born again, Paul was confident that he was willing to be reconciled to Onesimus.

Who was Onesimus? Paul makes it clear that he should be received no longer as a servant (*literally, a slave*), but also as a brother—both in the flesh, as well as in the Lord. Although we don't fully understand

their relationship, it is clear that Philemon could have rightfully felt justified in holding Onesimus accountable in the flesh. In calling on Philemon to elevate his spiritual relationship over his physical rights and relationship to Onesimus, Paul confirmed the perspective taught by Jesus, that social norms and barriers are insignificant,² and that differences between brethren should be respectfully resolved in His truth, love, and grace.³

It is no small task to overcome one's biases and prejudices. Perhaps for this reason Paul began his exhortation to Philemon by challenging him to acknowledge every good thing that Christ had instilled in him.⁴ If he would have relied on human nature, this extra dimension in their relationship may have made it even more difficult for Philemon to reconcile. Paul was confident Philemon would respond in the Spirit.

What good things has Christ put into your heart, soul, and mind? As with Philemon, those good things are the ingredients of restored relationships. A follower of Jesus must receive the Holy Spirit⁵ in order to be born again. This new spirit places the nature of Christ within the believer, replacing a self-centered perspective. It replaces condemnation with mercy,⁶ apathy with love,⁷ and a demanding nature with a servant heart.⁸ These key truths are the foundation of Paul's confidence in Philemon.

Paul demonstrated these attitudes before requesting them from Philemon. He acknowledges that he could require compliance from Philemon, but chose rather to beseech him—to gently, but earnestly, ask Philemon to respond in the love of Christ.⁹ He continues on to assure Philemon that he would not do anything in this matter without first seeking Philemon's understanding and discernment on the matter so that Philemon would feel no pressure to conform to Paul's desires, but rather,

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willingly let the nature of Jesus guide his response.¹⁰ The Holy Ghost working in Paul enabled him to see the potential in an unprofitable servant, share the Gospel with him, and then intercede for Onesimus with his master, Philemon.

We are the recipients of these same actions through Christ Jesus, who saw our potential, brought the Good News of salvation to us, and then interceded on our behalf to our Master, the Living God, to whom we were unprofitable servants. Just as Paul would do nothing without Philemon's consent, Jesus does not demand anything of the Father, but rather entreats Him on our behalf. Just as Onesimus had to carry the letter from Paul in faith to Philemon, we must appear in faith before our Creator trusting in the relationship between the Father and our Lord.

Can you hear Jesus asking the Father to receive us as those created in His own image, as brothers beloved to Jesus, in the likeness of the Father as well as in the likeness of His Spirit? So, Paul entreated Philemon to receive Onesimus, as a brother

beloved, not only in the flesh, but also in spirit. Just as Jesus hung on the cross before God, paying our sin-debt, Paul placed himself in debt to Philemon, averring that he would pay anything that Onesimus owed Philemon.¹¹

In contrast, we are reminded of the Lord's parable of the unjust servant, who was unwilling to forgive the extremely small debt owed by his fellow servant, and was condemned by the Lord. If we have any awareness of what Christ has done for us, we must have merciful hearts, willing to forgive.

*"So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses."*¹²

Having confidence in Philemon's obedience, Paul wrote this letter of intercession as a prisoner himself. He was not in any position to enforce a response in Philemon. He relied on the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work that he was unable to do himself. But he did not shy away from provoking Philemon to love and good works.¹³ Following Paul's example, we can also demonstrate our love by gently nudging one another toward reconciled relationships. Not demanding, but rather beseeching one another to receive all whom Christ has purchased with His shed blood. If we have the need to

receive an estranged brother, we will be blessed if we do more than we are asked.

Do you have a relationship that has been damaged? Are you willing to surrender to the Lord's urging to be reconciled? Have you been approached by someone seeking reconciliation, only to turn them away because it seemed too difficult? Could you serve in a mediator role, as Paul did with Philemon?

The freedom of reconciliation is within reach through the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Ghost.

(Footnotes)

¹ Philemon 1:21

² John 4:27, Rom. 2:11

³ Matt. 5:23-24

⁴ Philemon 1:6

⁵ Acts 19:1-6

⁶ John 3:17

⁷ 1 Peter 1:22

⁸ John 13:14

⁹ Philemon 1:8-10

¹⁰ Philemon 1:14

¹¹ Philemon 1:16-18

¹² Matt. 18:35

¹³ Heb. 10:24