

Adult Bible Class

Philemon

Introduction:

Verse 1: “prisoner” Paul’s service of Christ has led to his bondage; on this he will base his appeal to Philemon. “dear friend” “fellow worker” Paul emphasize the close ties he and Philemon have.

Verses 2-3: Paul addresses Archippus in Colossians 4:17; to call him “fellow soldier” is high praise.

This is Paul’s common greeting in his letters. There are not two sides to Paul. He is the same in a private letter as he is in a public letter.

Verses 4-7: One’s faith in the Lord necessarily leads to love for the saints, justification and then sanctification. That faith also leads to witness and growth in knowledge. This is good both for the individual and for the church as a whole. Paul rejoices that Philemon’s work has benefited the saints. “Hearts of” translates the Greek word *splagchna* which really means “guts or bowels.” In the ancient world this part of the body was considered to be the seat of emotion.

Request:

Verses 8-11: Paul hints at his apostolic authority given by Christ to command, but then says he will not use it in this case. He wants Philemon to act on the basis of love. “Old man” (*presbutes*) could also mean “ambassador,” for Philemon could easily have been Paul’s own age. Paul is acting on behalf of another as one sent. The appeal is for Onesimus to whom Paul gave birth to spiritually during his imprisonment. Before this time the slave Onesimus must not have been a believer. There is a play on words here for the name Onesimus means “useful.” This is a former Jewish Pharisee referring to a Gentile slave as his “son.” This highlights the inclusive nature of Christianity. Onesimus’ usefulness is in his new found faith. He will be useful now as a more willing worker but more importantly as a brother in the faith.

Verses 12-14: Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus to take the place of the service Philemon himself could perform for Paul as a prisoner. Yet he wanted Philemon to offer Onesimus’ service to him from a willing heart.

Verses 15-16: Paul points out God’s working in this whole matter. What must have caused pain and trouble for both Philemon and Onesimus is now working out for God’s own purpose. Paul speaks of Onesimus’ departure in the passive voice. God was the divine active agent. Now Philemon may have Onesimus back for good but not as a slave, instead as a brother into eternity. He returns as a slave legally speaking, but also even more than a slave, as a brother in the Lord spiritually speaking.

Verses 17-19: This is Paul’s rhetorical twist, his guilt trip. “If you think of me as your partner, welcome Onesimus back.” Onesimus probably did owe Philemon money that he took from him when he ran away. Paul is willing to pay for that even though Philemon owes Paul his very life, (spiritually and eternally speaking). Onesimus’ debt should be more than taken care of by what Philemon owes Paul.

Verses 20-21: The joy Paul would have is that Philemon would do as he wishes by the strength of the Lord (sanctification). Philemon’s generosity based on his new life in Christ will greatly encourage Paul. Paul reinforces his request by letting Philemon know that he trusts that Philemon will do the right thing and even more (perhaps free his slave Onesimus?).

Conclusion:

Verse 22: Before Paul ends his letter he thinks of one more thing, that he is planning to visit Colosse when he is released from his house arrest in Rome. This is what the Christian church at Colosse had been praying for (“your prayers” is in the plural).

Verses 23-25: All these people were mentioned as sending greetings in Colossians 4:10-14. Paul ends his letter with a benediction. The “your” is in the plural (y’all). Thus this letter is for the whole church as well.

This is the most personal of Paul’s four letters written to persons in the New Testament. Martin Luther portrays Paul as being a “Christ” to Onesimus, pleading the case of a runaway slave who deserved nothing but punishment as Christ pleads our case before the heavenly Father. A man who believes and knows that he has come back to God as God’s runaway slave and has been welcomed as a son can write God’s gospel into a small matter as naturally and gracefully as Paul does so in this letter.