

PHILEMON, A SPECIAL BROTHER IN CHRIST
Philemon 1-7

Intro: The epistle to Philemon is one of the four one-
chapter books of the New Testament. The others are 2
John, 3 John, and Jude. There is only one one-chapter book
in the OT: the prophecy of Obadiah.

The epistle to Philemon was written at the same time as the
epistle to the Colossian church. In fact, Philemon was not
only a member of the Colossian church, but it would seem from
verse 2 that the church met in his home. It is generally
agreed that Apphia (v. 2) was Philemon's wife, and that
Archippus (v. 2) was his son. Furthermore, it appears that
at this time Archippus was the one who was chiefly
responsible for the ministry at Colossae.

We can gather from the details given in this epistle that
Philemon was one of the "masters" whom Paul addressed in the
Colossian epistle. He was well-to-do.

It would seem also from v. 19b that Paul had been the one who
had led Philemon to Christ, not in Colossae, but somewhere
else where they had met. Where that was, we do not know.

Although Philemon's name appears only once in the NT (v. 1),
Paul left little doubt in writing to Philemon that a very
strong bond of friendship and fellowship in Christ existed
between the two of them. He called him "brother" twice in
this epistle (vv. 7, 20--a term which he used also for
Timothy [v. 1], and for Onesimus [v. 16]). In verse 1 Paul
called Philemon "our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer."
But even if none of these expressions had been used, it is
easy to tell from the general tone of the epistle that
Philemon was A SPECIAL BROTHER IN CHRIST to the Apostle Paul.

However, after having said all of this, there is another
thing that needs to be mentioned with regard to the epistle
itself.

From the early days of the church there have been those who
have wondered why it should be included in the Scriptures.
The argument has been that it is an epistle which really just
concerns three men: Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Paul did
send his greetings to the church at Colossae in verses 2b and
3, but it is not a letter in which Paul was ministering in
particular to the church. This was a personal matter between
Paul and Philemon involving Onesimus. The letter was
probably delivered to Philemon by Onesimus himself and
Tychicus when they delivered the Colossian epistle. So the
question is this: Should such a personal and private letter

take its place with such letters as Colossians, and Ephesians, and Romans, and so on, as being a part of the Word of God?

The answer to that question is, Yes! And I think there are two good reasons for responding in the affirmative:

- 1) We are going to see that this epistle give us a wonderful lesson in forgiveness. In fact, Alexander Maclaren, that much-loved Scottish preacher who died early in this century, had this to say about this epistle to Philemon:

...I have been in the habit of looking at it (the epistle), as if it were a kind of parable of the way in which our Master pleads with us to do the things that he desires (italics mine). The motive and principles of practical Christianity are all reducible to one--imitation of Jesus Christ. And therefore it is not fanciful if here we see, shining through the demeanour and conduct of the Apostle, some hint of the manner of the Master (Vol. 10, p. 196).

- 2) We have a marvelous picture, in Paul's pleading with Philemon, of our Lord's pleading with the Father on our behalf. It would be hard to find in all of Scripture a more vivid portrayal of the Gospel. But we will see more of that as we get farther into the epistle.

Today we are concerned about the introduction to this brief letter: verses 1 through 7.

Notice with me, first of all,

I. THE TONE OF THE INTRODUCTION.

There have been those who have accused Paul of flattery.

There is no question but that Paul's words are very commendatory. It is impossible for any thoughtful reader not to see this. Those who are critical of Paul say that he was setting Philemon up so that Philemon would not be able to say "no" to Paul regarding Onesimus. But was Paul a flatterer?

Proverbs 26:28 says, "...a flattering mouth worketh ruin." Would you say that about Paul's words here? Verse 5 of Proverbs 29 says, "A man that flattereth his neighbour spreadeth a net for his feet." Is that what Paul was doing to Philemon?

The dictionary defines flattery as insincere and

excessive praise. Did Paul say anything here that he did not mean, or did he say anything here that was not true? Was Paul saying what he said just to get Philemon to do what he wanted him to do? Some immature people think that whenever you speak in a complimentary manner of another person, it is flattery.

If Paul's words were flattery, then this epistle has no place in the Word of God.

Perhaps there is a lesson for all of us to learn from the way the Apostle Paul has written. It seems that there is a place for us to express our thanksgiving to people for what they have done, and to be grateful for things that they have done which are pleasing to the Lord. This can be shown to have been characteristic of Paul. See such passages as Romans 15:14,

And I myself also am persuaded of you, brethren,
that ye also are full of goodness,
filled with all knowledge,
able also to admonish one another.

Or consider 1 Cor. 1:4-7,

I thank my God always on your behalf,
for the grace of God
which is given you by Jesus Christ;
That in every thing ye are enriched by him,
in all utterance, and in all knowledge;
Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you:
So that ye come behind in no gift;
waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Think also of 1 Thess. 1:2, 3,

We give thanks to God always for you all,
making mention of you in our prayers;
Remembering without ceasing your work of faith,
and labour of love, and patience of hope
in our Lord Jesus Christ,
in the sight of God and our Father.

We must totally reject any idea of flattery. Paul was a man who trusted God to work on the hearts of others to do the will of the Father. But he did believe that it is only right that we should recognize people for what they are before God, and for the way the work of the Lord has been made evident in their lives. We can turn to many Pauline passages in which he expressed his appreciation for his fellow believers and his fellow workers in the work of the Lord. Whenever he did, he was never excessive, never insincere, and never laying a trap for anyone.

Let us follow his example.

But let us go on to notice Paul's use of

II. COMBINATIONS OF TWO.

Paul's introductions are all very similar (and they should have been because he was always dealing with eternal truths which every church needed). But in reading over this introduction, I was struck with the way Paul seemed to deal with persons and things in pairs.

For example, we have:

- 1) Paul and Philemon (v. 1).
- 2) Individuals and the church (v. 2).
- 3) Grace and peace (v. 3).
- 4) God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 3).
- 5) Thanksgiving and intercession (vv. 4, 6).
- 6) Love and faith (v. 5).
- 7) The Lord Jesus and the saints (v. 5).
- 8) Joy and consolation (v. 7).

I believe that if we will consider these combinations of two that they will give us a good understanding of what was on Paul's heart as he wrote the first seven verses of this epistle. To be sure, some overlap with each other, but let us take them in their relationships with each other, and seek, with the Spirit's help, to understand what Paul was saying to Philemon.

Let me consider these with you under three headings:

- A. The Address of the Epistle (Ph. 1, 2).
- B. The Greetings (Ph. 3).
- C. The Prayer (Ph. 4-7).

Let us look at the first of these:

- A. The Address of the Epistle (Ph. 1, 2).

The two names that are the most important are Paul and Philemon. Paul was the writer, and the epistle was addressed to Philemon. Paul was an apostle, at that time "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (not of the Roman government); Philemon was a master and a slave holder. Both men were believers in Christ, and united in Christ with a special love for each other. And, as I have already indicated, Paul probably had led Philemon to Christ. So Paul was the spiritual father of Philemon.

But Paul was not so taken up with Philemon and the problem of Onesimus that he had forgotten about the

others who were related to himself and to Philemon. And so he mentioned Timothy, Apphia, Archippus, and as though that were not enough, he mentioned "the church in thy house."

Timothy was younger than Paul, Paul's spiritual son, and yet also his brother in the the Lord. How important it is for us to know people, the Lord's people, their relationships to each other, and to us in the Lord. They are the elite of heaven while still sojourning on earth.

But let us go on to:

B. The greetings (Ph. 3).

The greetings were twofold: Grace and peace.

And they had a twofold source: Not just from God or the Lord Jesus Christ, but from both "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every day, in fact, for every moment of every day we all need "grace" and "peace." And this has been true of every believer since the beginning of time. We all are weak, and in need of strength. That is why we need "grace." We all are faced continually with trials of various kinds, and we need "peace."

Our needs are immeasurable and unending. But we have an inexhaustible supply in our heavenly Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ. Both the Father and our Savior have made it their business to supply us with these two needs which we all have: "Grace...and peace...."

We should never take our need lightly, nor should we ever minimize the provision that is made for our need.

C. The prayer (Ph. 4-7).

These are words that Paul repeated frequently, but that is what makes them so important.

Let us notice first,

1. The two kinds of prayer (Ph. 4).

Paul prayed in different ways, but here he mentioned two kinds of prayer which he prayed

regularly for Philemon:

- 1) Thanksgiving.
- 2) Intercession.

Here is a Jewish believer thanking the Lord for his brother in Christ, a Gentile believer. And think of all that Paul was able to say in thanksgiving to God when he prayed for Philemon!

Let me wait for just a moment before I mention the nature of Paul's intercession for Philemon, the way he prayed for Philemon.

We can always be thankful to God for each other, but we also need to continue praying for each other.

But before we get to Paul's prayer requests for Philemon, let us notice:

2. Two encouragements Paul had to pray for Philemon (Ph. 5).

There were Philemon's "love" and his "faith."

And there were two who were the objects of Philemon's "faith" and "love." The object of his "faith" was "the Lord Jesus." The objects of his love were "all saints."

Philemon had not just trusted the Lord at some time in the past, but he was trusting the Lord day by day. And his love for the "saints," the people of God, was proof of his faith in the Lord.

Always look for these in the lives of those who profess to be the Lord's people. Look for them in your own life. No person is ever saved without have these results in his life. And these are intended to be real encouragements for us to pray.

And now we come, at the end of this introduction, to:

3. The two requests (Ph. 6, 7).

One has to do with the all people, but, in a special way, with the people of the world. This is in verse 6. The other has to do with the Lord's people in particular. This is verse 7.

a. The communication of Philemon's faith (v. 6).

This was to be seen in the way Philemon lived, acknowledging by his very behavior that all the good that was in him was there because of "Christ Jesus."

Those who think that Paul was a flatterer need to pay particular attention to this statement. He had nothing good except what he had in Christ. He was a trophy of the grace of God. His life would be a testimony to all people of the grace of God.

b. The blessing Philemon had been to believers.

The hearts, the souls, the minds, of believers had been refreshed by Philemon. And this had brought two special blessings to Paul:

- 1) Great joy.
- 2) Encouragement. Think of living so as to be an encouragement to the one who led you to Christ!

Concl: What an introduction! Written by a prisoner who had many reasons to be discouraged, this epistle is permeated at its very beginning with praise and joy in the Lord. But, as we are going to see in the verses which follow, things are never so good but what they can be better. And, it is also true that where things are good, and where the blessing of God abounds, trials and testings are always coming up which can result in two very different ways:

- 1) Either by our response the blessing can be removed, or
- 2) By our favorable response, the blessing can get better than it ever was before.

That is why we must never stop praying for each other, recognizing that all of our blessings come from the Lord, and that without Him the blessings will not continue.

May the Lord enable us to understand what Paul wrote in these verses, and to practise in our lives the things that will please the Lord, bring the greatest glory to Him, and result in the greatest blessing for everyone concerned. Philemon was to face a great test in his life: Would he forgive Onesimus, and receive him back, or would he exercise the punishment which Onesimus deserved, and which he had the right to inflict--even to death?

Perhaps as Paul wrote Col. 3:13 he had Philemon in mind: "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another...."

ONESIMUS, PHILEMON'S SERVANT AND PAUL'S SON
Philemon 8-16

Intro: The story of Paul and Philemon and Onesimus is one of the greatest stories in the NT. Philemon was a rich master who lived in Colossae. Onesimus was his slave. Paul had led both of these men to Christ: Philemon first; then later, Onesimus.

The relationship between masters and slaves in those days was somewhat paradoxical; that is, a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, a bondslave was the property of his master, and the master was free to treat him as he wished. There are some terrible stories from that period which tell of the awful abuse of servants who had displeased their masters. But, on the other hand, there was often a great bond of affection between a master and his slaves. Bishop Moule, in his commentary on Philemon, quoted Aristotle who said that

...the slave is a portion of his master; as it were a living though separated portion of his body
(Colossian and Philemon Studies, pp. 309, 310).

Just what the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus had been before, we do not know. But Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon with great expectations that a very wonderful relationship would develop between the two men.

We should note that, although the Roman system of slavery was unjust in many ways, Paul did not take it upon himself to try to solve the problem. He did not feel that before God he had the right to set Onesimus free. Nor did he try to get Philemon to initiate a solution by letting Onesimus go free. He was actually appealing to Philemon to receive Onesimus back, and to forgive him. This is the whole burden of the epistle. But we can see by reading this letter that Paul did not write in a disinterested way, but he spoke of his great love for Onesimus, and for his love for Philemon. His purpose was to see this matter settled in a way that would be pleasing to the Lord. This letter contains some very good lessons for all of us when we are faced with a problem with another individual which needs to be resolved.

Let us consider, first of all,

I. PAUL'S APPROACH TO PHILEMON.

We see this in verses 8 and 9, as well as in verse 14.

We all know that Paul was an apostle. His authority as such was very great among the churches. What Paul

taught, they were in the habit of accepting as the truth. And what he told those early Christians to do, they accepted as the Word of God.

In the light of this it is interesting that Paul does not refer to himself any place in this epistle as an apostle. He does not, as we would say, "pull rank" on Philemon. As he mentioned in verse 8, he had the right to command Philemon to do the thing that was proper in this situation, but he deliberately chose not to do that.

He had the right to tell Philemon what to do because of three things:

- 1) As he said in verse 9, he was older than Philemon. It has been estimated that Paul was about 60 years old at this time.
- 2) He was, as I have said, an apostle.
- 3) Paul had been the one, it seems from verse 19, the one who had led Philemon to Christ.

He had all of this pressure that he could have applied on Philemon. But instead he decided, because of his love for Philemon, to "beseech" him. This meant that he would tell Philemon what he ought to do, to encourage him to do it, to exhort him to do it, but to leave the final decision to Philemon.

It is important for us help other believers to make their own decisions, but to encourage them to do that which would be pleasing to the Lord.

In verse 14 we see that Paul would not even keep Onesimus with him, although he seems to have needed him. He would not put Philemon in a position where he would be forced to do what Paul wanted him to do. Obedience to be true obedience, the kind that brings the blessing of God upon our lives, has to come from the heart. That is what Paul wanted to see in Philemon.

This is something that you young people, and you children, need to remember as you grow up. Your parents may seem to be hard on you at times when they make decisions for you. But remember that they are seeking to train you to do what pleases the Lord, to make your decisions God's way. They want you to think this way so that when you begin to make your own decisions, you will want to do the Lord's will.

And parents, let us remember this also. We are getting our children ready for life in this world. They will be subjected to all kinds of pressures, good and bad. We want them to be thinking in terms of what is good and

right in God's sight. That is why we need to teach them the Word, and tell them what they ought to do as problems arise. Although Philemon was a grown, mature man, Paul did not hesitate to tell Philemon what he ought to do. But he left the decision to Philemon.

Let us now see what Paul wanted Philemon to do.

II. PAUL'S REQUEST.

It can be stated in two words: "Receive him" See vv. 12, 15, and dipping over into our text for next week, v. 17.

Actually the three words that Paul used here are all different--although the first and the last have the same root. It is interesting to put them all together to see the full extent of what Paul was requesting.

- 1) Verse 12: This word means that Paul wanted Philemon himself to take Onesimus.
- 2) Verse 15: He wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus without any reservations. He wanted Onesimus to be restored fully to Philemon's favor.
- 3) Verse 17: Very similar to the word used in verse 12 with the added idea that Philemon would give Onesimus access to himself without having to go through others.

To illustrate what this would mean we need only to think of the terms under which King David permitted Absalom to come back to Jerusalem. We read in 2 Sam. 14:24,

And the king said,
Let him return to his own house,
and let him not see my face.
So Absalom returned to his own house,
and saw not the king's face.

Absalom was accepted, but not fully accepted because he did not have access to the king. Paul wanted Onesimus to have full acceptance!

All of this was a big order. Paul was asking Philemon for a very great favor. He may have been asking more for Onesimus than Onesimus had had before he had run away.

And so the question naturally arises, Why would he make such a tremendous request for Onesimus?

The full answer carries over into the passage we will have next week, but let me point out what the reasons that are given in verses 10 through 16.

First, Paul wanted Philemon to take Onesimus back because Onesimus had been saved! Look at verse 10.

Paul said that Onesimus was now "my son, whom I have begotten in my bonds." Paul had not saved Onesimus. Only the Lord could do that. But Paul had been the instrument whom God had used to bring Onesimus to life in Christ. He was saying that Onesimus had been born again. He now had eternal life, divine life. He had been dead in his sins, but now he had been made spiritually alive!

Notice if you will the expression, "whom I have begotten in my bonds." Paul was saying that he could see in this one reason why he was a prisoner in Rome. It was through his imprisonment that he had met Onesimus, and had had the opportunity to tell him about Christ and to lead him to Christ. If there had been no other reason for Paul's imprisonment, this would have made it all worthwhile.

And Onesimus had been with Paul long enough for Paul to see the evidences of spiritual life in Onesimus. Do you remember that Paul called him in the Colossian epistle, "a faithful and beloved brother."

In the second place, Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus back because Onesimus had been changed!

This goes with the first reason, and yet it is deserving of a place by itself. See verse 11. Onesimus had been "unprofitable"; now he was "profitable."

Both of these words have the same root, but different prefixes attached to them. The word itself means useful. "Unprofitable" means not useful, or as we would say today, good-for-nothing. Onesimus was a worthless servant. It may have been that Philemon was actually glad to get rid of him, and that he had real turmoil in his heart when Onesimus showed up again in Colossae. But Paul went on to say that he now was not only useful, but, to state it literally, well-useful, or VERY useful! Through the grace of Christ Onesimus had been changed from a worthless servant into a servant that would prove most useful and most valuable to Philemon. Now Philemon could count on him to be "faithful." When you have said that about a servant, you have said everything that needs to be said.

In verse 13 Paul said that he would gladly have kept Onesimus with him because he knew that he would be very valuable to him in his work. It is very clear that Paul could not have recommended Onesimus too highly.

But there is another reason.

Thirdly, Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus because Onesimus had become very dear to Paul. He called him in verse 12, "mine own bowels."

With this expression which sounds so strange to us, Paul was telling Philemon that it had been a great personal grief and loss to send Onesimus back because Onesimus had occupied a place at the very center of Paul's heart. A great bond of affection existed between the apostle and the runaway slave, a love that was strengthened and enriched in Christ. Paul would gladly have kept Onesimus with him, but he felt that the only right thing for Onesimus to do was to go back to his master. But from the standpoint of his own love for Onesimus, it was with great reluctance that he sent him back.

If Paul could not have him, he wanted Philemon to treat him just as Paul himself would have treated him if Onesimus had stayed in Rome. This was because of the love that Paul had for him.

Then there is a fourth reason which is stated in verses 15 and 16.

It had to do with the blessing that Philemon would receive from having Onesimus with him.

Paul was not asking Philemon to take a servant back who would be a constant source of trouble to him. Nor was he asking Philemon to take a servant back who would run away again the first chance he got. He was asking Philemon to take a servant back who would be a blessing to him. He said you are going to receive him "for ever," and not just "as a servant, but above a servant," more than a servant, "a brother beloved...." He will come as your servant in the flesh, but he is now more than that: he is your brother in Christ!

When Paul was writing to Colossian church he said words that must have struck both Philemon and Onesimus with new meaning. It was this in Col. 3:9-11:

Lie not one to another,
seeing that ye have put off the old man
with his deeds, And have put on the new man,
which is renewed in knowledge
after the image of him that created him:
Where there is neither Greek nor Jew,
circumcision nor uncircumcision,
Barbarian, Scythian, **bond nor free:**

but Christ is all, and in all.

Concl: Onesimus was a trophy of grace! There is only one way to explain the tremendous change that had taken place in his life. He was a new creature in Christ!

Interestingly, the name Onesimus means "profitable, helpful." This was a common slave name. But Onesimus had been mis-named by his family. The Lord did not change his name, but changed him so that by the grace of God he could live up to his name. He made the man fit the name.

This is what we ought to look for in ourselves if we claim to be the children of God. We ought to be far better because of the grace of God than we could ever have been by natural birth. We ought to be better family members. We ought to be better workers, better students, better friends, better people in every way. If we are not changed, if we are not improved over what we used to be, but still call ourselves Christians, then there is something very wrong. As I have said over and over again before, Christ never leaves us just like we were before we knew Him. We are changed. We are better. We are not perfect, but we will be some day. Paul had seen the change in Onesimus, and he loved him because of the change. That is one reason he sent Onesimus back to Philemon. He wanted Philemon to see the change, too, and to be blessed by a servant who had been worthless, but now would be a source of daily blessing to him.

As I mentioned last week, Luther said, "We are all the Lord's Onesimi!" We are useless and worthless without Christ. But in Christ God can take the worst of us, and the most useless, and make us into useful instruments for His glory, and for the blessing of all who have anything to do with us. We cannot boast for ourselves in the change, but we boast in Him Who has transformed us by the saving power of His precious blood.

The best thing about the change that the Lord makes in us is that it makes us acceptable to God. Onesimus was cleansed from his sin, his guilt was removed, and he was clothed with divine righteousness. And all of this was through Christ and Christ's death on the Cross.

Perhaps you are one who has been sincerely seeking to change yourself. Let me point you to the One Who saved and changed Onesimus. He can transform you into a child of God, and He is the only One Who can do it, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to Him today. Put your trust in Christ to make you acceptable to God, and to transform your worthless life into one that will glorify Him and make you His useful servant.

PAUL, A TYPE OF CHRIST
Philemon 17-25

Intro: Since we recently finished studying Paul's epistle to the Colossians, I am not going to take much time today with the last four verses of this epistle. But I do want to say a little about each of them.

We learned much about prayer in Colossians. This epistle to Philemon shows also that Paul was a man who prayed much, and who believed that God hears and answers prayer. He was mainly concerned with spiritual needs, but you will notice in verse 22 of Philemon that Paul was asking Philemon to pray that Paul would be able to visit him in Colossae. Paul believed that the Lord worked in daily circumstances, and that God works in answer to prayer, doing things because His people pray that He would not do otherwise.

So we see how important prayer was for Paul, and how he was eager to have his fellow-believers pray for him.

The men who are referred to at the end of this epistle--the names you find in verses 23, 24--were all mentioned in Colossians:

- 1) Epaphras we know was a Colossian who was in Rome with Paul. He was a man mighty in prayer, and Paul here called him his "fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus."
- 2) Marcus was John Mark.
- 3) In Colossians Paul called Aristarchus his "fellow-prisoner."
- 4) Demas was only mentioned by name in Colossians, as he is here. He was later to leave the Apostle Paul, showing that he was not a true child of God.
- 5) Lucas was Dr. Luke, the beloved physician, who was Paul's companion in much of his missionary work.

All of these were known not only to the Colossian church, but perhaps in a special way to Philemon. Hence, the greetings.

Regarding verse 25 we can say that, as Paul began and ended the Colossian epistle with a prayer for grace, that is what he did also in this letter to Philemon. How wonderful it would be for all of us if we only realized how very much we need the grace of God and the peace of God through Christ every day that we live--AND EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY!

As we conclude our study of Philemon for this series, I do want you to note the way in which Paul interceded for Onesimus with Philemon. There are three specific things which were a part of Paul's plea for Onesimus; one we had last Sunday, the other two are in our text for today.

First of all, we see in verse 17 that Paul wanted Philemon to receive Timothy as he would have received Paul himself.

Secondly, we see in verses 18 and 19 that Paul agreed voluntarily to accept the full debt which Onesimus owed to Philemon. Onesimus would not pay anything; Paul would pay all.

Thirdly and finally, verse 21 Paul expressed his complete confidence in Philemon that Philemon would not only do what Paul had asked him to do, but would go completely beyond his biggest request.

Obviously Paul's biggest request was not that Philemon let him pay Onesimus' debt, but it was Paul's request that Philemon receive Onesimus.

I doubt if any child of God could read this epistle very many times without being reminded of the Gospel. We can see how Paul taught the doctrine of forgiveness by what he was asking Philemon to do, but it seems that the intercessory, mediatorial work of Christ is pictured by Paul's words in an unmistakable way.

So let me refer to Luther's words again: "We are all the Lord's Onesimi!" This would mean that Onesimus represents us, the sinners. Paul here would be a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Mediator. And, since he was pleading with Philemon to accept Onesimus, Philemon would represent God, the Father.

Before we get into some of these wonderful details, let me point out to you that Onesimus did not have any part in the negotiations between Paul and Philemon. No word of Onesimus is recorded here. There is nothing in this epistle to make us think that Onesimus had even requested this letter. No, we are looking at a letter which Paul wrote to Philemon voluntarily because of his great love for Onesimus. In fact, it may very have been that Onesimus did not even think of going back to Philemon until Paul talked to him about it.

Do you see the parallel with us as sinners before God?

We were not concerned about going to God. We did not ask the Lord Jesus Christ to help us. We had nothing to say to the Father. Our present condition in Christ is the result of the work of Christ in our behalf, without any help from us, a work which the Lord voluntarily took upon Himself because of His great love for us. If it had not been for Paul, the problem between Philemon and Onesimus might never have been resolved. The same is true to an infinitely higher degree in

our relationship to God. If the Lord had not taken upon Himself to help us back to God, we would still be away from God.

With that in mind, let us consider the first point of Paul's appeal:

I. "RECEIVE HIM" (Ph. 17).

If you were here last Sunday I hope you will remember that I pointed out to you that there are three times in this letter when Paul said, "Receive him." You will find these in verse 12, 15, and 17.

You will also remember I mentioned that there are three different words that Paul used which are correctly translated by "receive him."

The word in verse 12 means that Paul wanted Philemon himself to make the decision to receive him back, and that he would personally receive him.

The word in verse 15 means that he wanted Philemon to take Onesimus back without any reservations. He wanted a full acceptance for Onesimus. This would be irrevocable; it would be "for ever."

The word in verse 17 included the idea that Onesimus would have access himself to Philemon without having to go through others.

And along with this latter point in verse 17 we see that Paul wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus the same way he would have accepted Paul himself.

I feel that I can assure you that, while Philemon had not been unkind to Onesimus before he ran away, yet I know that Onesimus had never been treated like Philemon was prepared to treat Paul when Paul came to his house.

Now let me apply all of this to Christ and His appeal to the Father on our behalf.

We speak so often about receiving Christ (and it is right that would should, but a greater question is whether or not God will receive us! If Christ had not come to do what He did on the Cross, we would still be outcasts from heaven, on our way to hell!

But He did come. He did die. And on that basis He can appeal, and appeal successfully, for God to receive us:

- 1) To receive us Himself.
 - 2) To receive us forever--without any reservations or exclusions. He will never change His mind about us.
 - 3) To give us access to His presence twenty-four hours of every day.
- And that which is the greatest and most unbelievable of all:
- 4) TO RECEIVE US AS CHRIST HIMSELF IS RECEIVED.

When I think of this last point, I try to imagine what Philemon was going to do in preparation for the possibility that Paul might visit him. (See the request in verse 22.) The house and grounds would have been put in perfect order. Special meals would have been prepared. Other commitments and responsibilities would have been postponed. Paul would have had more than a bed to sleep in; HE WOULD HAVE BEEN TREATED AS ROYALTY!

You might say, "But that would be ridiculous, for Philemon to treat a returned slave who had robbed him with the same joy and enthusiasm that Philemon would have shown about a visit from Paul." Yes, I agree, it does sound a little far-fetched. But do you know something that is even more ridiculous than that? It is that God would accept me, and accept you--unworthy, guilty, defiled, and condemned sinners--that He would accept us as He accepts His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! Ephesians 1:6 tells us that we are "accepted in the beloved." And who is "the beloved"? It is Christ!

Because Christ died for us, and we by faith are in Him, we are received by God Himself. We are received unconditionally and forever. We have the right to go to Him on any day, at any time of the day or night, knowing that the Father's door and the Father's heart will be open to us!

But let me hurry on to my second point.

II. "PUT THAT ON MINE ACCOUNT" (Ph. 18, 19).

As far as Philemon and Onesimus were concerned, this means that Paul made himself responsible for every debt which Onesimus owed Philemon. I do not know how much that was, but I do know that after Philemon received this letter, he knew that all of Onesimus' obligations were suddenly cleared off of the books.

If this not true of us in our relationship with God? The debt we had with God was enormous. We could never have paid it off! But that is what our Lord did.

Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe;
 Sin had left a crimson stain,
 He washed it white as snow.

Why did Christ die? Let Isaiah answer for us.
 Surely he hath borne our griefs,
 and carried our sorrows:
 yet we did esteem him stricken,
 smitten of God, and afflicted.
 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
 he was bruised for our iniquities:
 the chastisement of our peace was upon him;
 and with his stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:4, 5).

Why did Christ die? Let Peter answer for us.
 For Christ hath once suffered for sins,
 the just for the unjust,
 that he might bring us to God,
 being put to death in the flesh,
 but quickened by the Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18).

Why did Christ die? Let Paul answer for us.
 But God commendeth his love toward us,
 in that, while we were yet sinners,
 Christ died for us.
 Much more then,
 being now justified by his blood,
 we shall be saved from wrath through him
 (Rom. 5:8, 9).

There are always limits to types. The real picture would have been portrayed more accurately if Philemon had actually told Paul to write this letter, and had told Paul what to say. Oh, how amazing is the grace of God!

One last point:

III. "THOU WILT ALSO DO MORE THAN I SAY" (Ph. 21).

You and I feel inclined to say that Paul was asking Philemon to do too much! Yes, he was. Onesimus did not deserve any of it. But even at that, Paul knew Philemon's heart, and he knew that Philemon would not stop with what Paul had asked him to do; he would do even more!

What do you suppose the "even more" would be? Do you suppose he would give Onesimus his freedom? We are not in any position to say.

But think of this as it relates to our heavenly Father?

Do you remember how Paul spoke of God in Eph. 3:20?

Now unto him that able to do exceeding abundantly
above all that we ask or think,
according to the power that worketh in us.

For Him to be able to do it, means that He will do it.

One of those "much more" things that He does is mentioned
in Rom. 8:28. Another is in 1 John 3:1. The Father has
not only done what we need, and given what we need, but
He has given us far more in grace than we will ever need.
What a Savior we have, and what a heavenly Father!

Concl: Can you understand the Gospel a little better after
seeing the Gospel in Paul's letter to Philemon? We
should be able to. Are you one of the Lord's Onesimi? I do
not mean by that, are you a runaway from God, under his
wrath, facing divine judgment. I know you are that if you
have not trusted Christ as your Savior.

To be one of the Lord's Onesimi you have to come back to God.
You come with the letter of the Lord Jesus Christ in your
hand, the promises of redemption. You come seeking God's
mercy and forgiveness. You come to find your place of
acceptance--complete and eternal--in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Surely as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we can
come with renewed thanksgiving to God that our heavenly
Father has not only done all that the Son has asked Him to do
for you and for me, but He actually sent His Son to do all
that He did for us, that we might be received by Him.

May God bless the truth of this short epistle to each one of
us as He sees our need!