

**A “Useful” Letter  
Philemon 1:1-25**

Brothers and sisters, have you ever had the experience of walking into the middle of a conversation? For example, someone walks into the lunch room at work and hears two co-workers talking just as one of them says *“oh, for sure - the Nazis did a very good job at that.”*

If this was you, your first reaction would probably be to think *“how can anyone use the words Nazis and good in the same sentence?”* What you’ve heard shocks you, you find it offensive.

This kind of situation is what we call ‘walking in on a conversation at the wrong time’, because you have not heard any of the conversation that took place leading up to that statement and you have no idea about the context in which it was made. And in such situations its tempting to grab your lunch and eat it elsewhere because you don’t like what you just heard and you have no desire to be around people talking about such things.

However, the right thing to do would be to apologize for interrupting their conversation and ask them to explain what you overheard them saying. Otherwise, you will end up harboring prejudicial assumptions about them that would make you biased against them and judging them to be despicable human beings – all based on hearsay with no context.

And reading Paul’s letter to Philemon is kind of like walking in on such a conversation. Both because we have very little information about the context and the background details for this letter, and also because of its references to Onesimus as a slave and Philemon, a brother in Christ who has a church meeting in his home, as a slave-owner.

These things seem incongruous, they don’t go together in our minds much less our faith, it’s offensive to us... so we’d rather just walk away and not engage with it. However that would not be the right thing to do because this is Holy Scripture... and that means, as 2 Timothy 3:15-16 says, its purpose is to make use wise for salvation in Christ and that as a part of holy

scripture it is *“useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

And, this letter was never intended to be a private conversation but was also addressed to the church that met in Philemon’s house, and thus what is addressed for one congregation is also addressed to all congregations in the Church of Jesus Christ, so we can’t just walk away...

So - let me fill you in on the context and all the back story to this letter in order that it can indeed make us wise for salvation in Christ and equip us for the good works that God has planned out for us to do, here in Valleyview as Christ’s body.

So Philemon and his wife Apphia lived in the city of Colossae, in the region of Phrygia which we know as modern-day Turkey, about 190 kilometers east of Ephesus. It is very likely that Philemon met the Apostle Paul in Ephesus, and Paul could have made a visit to the Colossian church as well since it was close by.

Philemon was a leader in the Colossian church, and not only hosted the church in his home but he used his resources and money to support and further the ministry of Paul. As a result, he had developed a close relationship and a good rapport with the Apostle and Paul found Philemon’s support of his work very encouraging. When Paul moved on from Ephesus to return to Jerusalem and they had kept in touch, though it was a bit more difficult for Philemon to support Paul’s ministry from such a distance.

Now when Paul returned to Jerusalem, he ended up in trouble with the Jewish authorities and wound up in prison, under house arrest while awaiting trial. To make a long story short Paul made an appeal to have his trial heard by Caesar because he had Roman citizenship so he was transferred to Rome, where he waited while under house arrest for his appeal to be heard.

Now, while Paul was having troubles with Jewish authorities, trials and making appeals to Caesar, Philemon was having troubles with one of his slaves, Onesimus, which is very ironic

because his name meant “useful” and apparently he was anything but useful. His uselessness eventually manifested itself in his decision to run away from Philemon’s household. However, as providence would have it Onesimus ran away to Rome at the same time that Paul was there under house arrest, and through God’s work in mysterious ways he came into contact with Paul and was mentored into genuine faith as a believer in Christ.

And Onesimus’ conversion brought about a dramatic change in his character! He went from being a lazy useless slave who ran away from hard work to someone who was willing to take up the cause of the gospel and endure the scorn and shame of being associated with the work of Christ. He was extremely helpful to Paul and Paul became very fond of him and was impressed with his hard work and dedication to the gospel and very much wanted to keep him in Rome for the duration of his house arrest.

However, Onesimus was rightfully part of Philemon’s estate as a slave and even though Onesimus was now a believer and a

changed man it did not erase his obligations to Philemon, nor could Paul in good conscience harbor a runaway slave, or decide to keep him as an assistant without Philemon’s knowledge or permission.

Furthermore, now that both Onesimus and Philemon were brothers in the Lord, a reconciliation over Onesimus’ past behavior and crime of fleeing had to occur between them – it could not stand unresolved, it had to be dealt with in the Lord. Onesimus had to seek forgiveness and Philemon had to offer forgiveness.

Now at this point I have to pause the backstory, and acknowledge that to us it seems like an grave injustice that Paul would have Onesimus seek forgiveness from Philemon for running away as a slave. We would much rather see Paul instructing Philemon to repent of slave ownership and seek Onesimus’ forgiveness and be reconciled by setting him free, along with any other slaves in his household. That seems right to our current way of thinking.

But I think its important for us to realize that when it comes to the issue of slavery, we are all rightly horrified and convicted that the abuse and mistreatment inflicted upon slaves is wrong, and that is consistent with what scripture teaches. In fact its not a coincidence that Paul says in Colossians 4:1 *“Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.”*

And our current conviction that ethnic or race-based institutional slavery is repugnant is also biblically correct. When the people of Israel were enslaved by the Egyptians, the Lord delivered them from this slavery with signs and wonders and this deliverance and freedom is carried forward in all sorts of ways for God’s people through the Old and New Testament.

But, we also believe slavery is fundamentally wrong because one man should not own another man like we own property or animals. And on one level that is true – we are human beings created in God’s Image.

However... because we are created in God’s Image we are also vested with authority and have been installed to rule over the creation, which also means that authority is exercised over other human beings within our societal structure. Even today, while children are not property, they still belong to their parents.

Husbands and wives are legally bound to each other, and from the bible’s perspective Husband’s and wives belong to each other – body and soul, and scripture is very clear that we belong to God, so we must be very careful when we repudiate the commodification of human beings in slavery that we do not also inadvertently repudiate God’s authority and rule within societies’ structure, and give expression to our sinful rebellion... *“You’re not the boss of me!!”*

So the biblical writers tend to see slavery as a rather heavy-handed means by which authority and rule structured society, certainly affected by sin, and thus requiring the emphasis in scripture on fair and just treatment for slaves because God would hold everyone accountable.

All this is to help us understand that the slavery we are most familiar with is 18<sup>th</sup> century slavery in America which was characterized by a zenith of terrible abuse, racial degradation, and the denial of God's image in mankind in a perfect storm - and thus for us slavery is really a black and white issue – pun intended. But the slavery during the time of the New Testament was not yet so depraved and we should not see it as such a black and white issue, and allow this to stand in the way of what we can receive from Paul's letter to Philemon about his slave Onesimus.

So, to pick up the back story again. Paul writes to his good friend and brother in the Lord Philemon to let him know what has occurred with Onesimus, to very gently and tactfully broach the subject of being reconciled to Onesimus. Paul also makes an indirect request, where you ask without asking, that Philemon consider sending Onesimus back to Paul to continue assisting him with his gospel work.

And that is the context and backstory surrounding this letter brothers and sisters. So now that we are better informed let's

take a closer look at how Paul crafts this letter so that it will be favorably received by Philemon and will achieve its goals.

So we start with the introduction and we see that it is both Paul and Timothy who are sending this correspondence. A wise move since Paul is about to make a difficult request for reconciliation and for Onesimus to be sent back. So indicating that both he and Timothy have sent this letter shows that this isn't just Paul's personal opinion or a self-interested request, other godly leaders see the value in this. We also see that Paul also does not use his title of Apostle here, but rather that he is a prisoner of Christ, and we'll say more about that later.

Then comes the section where the recipients of the letter are stated and we can see that the primary recipient is Philemon along with Apphia and Archippus as well as the Colossian church. Paul is writing these people in relationship to his gospel work, so they are called dear friend, sister, fellow worker, fellow soldier. So, while Paul's request is directed to Philemon, addressing the letter to these other people as well as the church indicates that Philemon would consider their

discernment in his decision so that whatever was decided its not just his own preferences but also part of something that the Holy Spirit was leading all of them towards.

It should also be mentioned that Onesimus' behavior and crime was not a private crime but a public one and thus on his return to the household his reconciliation needed to include these other people and the congregation as well. There was also the additional teaching benefit for the church of seeing this reconciliation take place, a concrete example of the gospel affecting the everyday lives of those who followed Jesus and walked their talk.

Paul then offers greetings to them with a standard Christian greeting and this shows that he considers them to be fellow believers and true Christians.

Then he offers thanksgivings and prayers for them, he is thankful for their faith in Jesus Christ – no small matter in a pagan roman society – and for their sacrificial love for other believers. This gives him great encouragement and the result

is that other believers elsewhere are also encouraged by what Philemon and the Colossian church are doing. I'm not going to get into Paul's prayer in vs. 6 right now, that is actually the key verse in this letter that I'll come back to later on.

So, after he has built up and encouraged Philemon and the other recipients, Paul goes in for the ask. But its important that Philemon understand Paul is not using his apostolic authority to make this request. This is not the same as dealing with a matter of false teaching or idolatrous practice that has to be changed. Rather he wants to appeal to the sacrificial love that exists in each believer and which he knows fills Philemon's heart. As he has mentioned he has seen the evidence of this already in how Philemon has supported his ministry and blessed the church. So, Paul makes his request as an old man in need of help while he is under house arrest.

Then he broaches the subject of Onesimus and makes his appeal to help effect a reconciliation by describing his newfound connection with Onesimus, a spiritual son, and also speaking to the character change and the spiritual change in

him. Paul admits Onesimus was formerly “*useless*” and the Greek work for that sounds exactly like “*Christless*.” So Onesimus was useless without Christ in the past but now that he is “*Christful*.” He has become “*useful*.”

Then Paul admits he really would like to keep Onesimus with him as he is extremely fond of him, and he considers him as standing in for Philemon to support and help him. But, Paul does not want to be presumptuous, if Onesimus will stand in for Philemon to help and assist Paul, Philemon himself must send him back of his own choice.

Then Paul starts to frame this situation theologically to drive home the point that Philemon should consider this from a Christian perspective. He suggests that Onesimus’ flight has occurred in order that this transformation might take place, and they may be reunited now as brothers in the Lord. God’s sovereign hand is at work behind the scenes. Additionally their relationship as slave and master is now superseded by their relationship in Christ and as a result of that Paul asks

Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as he would welcome Paul himself – a brother in Christ.

Now Paul is intentionally vague here about what this might mean, how it would specifically affect their master slave relationship... and you have to read between the lines as it were. The general consensus is that Paul is asking Philemon to waive his rights as a master over a runaway slave and instead Philemon commission Onesimus to return to Paul as his contribution to work for the Lord. Paul is suggesting that this is ultimately better for Philemon because he knows Philemon’s heart is all about supporting the gospel work of Paul and the church and this opportunity to send Onesimus back is actually far more valuable to Philemon than having Onesimus stay and return to service in his household.

Paul then gets a little more assertive in his request stating that he himself is willing to pay back Philemon for any costs that Onesimus may have caused his master, telling Philemon “put it on my tab with you...” but then subtly reminding Philemon that his tab actually has a large credit on it since Paul’s

ministry brought Philemon to Christ. So Paul in a round about way says *“you kind of owe me one here...”*

Then with a clever pun Paul makes it clear that he would like Philemon to send Onesimus back to him. In vs. 20 he says he would like some *“benefit”*... in the Greek he wants some *“Onemia”* which sounds a lot like Onesimus, from Philemon – just in case Philemon is not getting the hint.

So, Paul closes the letter expressing his confidence that Philemon will understand and go beyond what he is asking for, and adds in a footnote of good news that he expects to be released from house arrest as they have all been praying for and that he plans to visit them on his way home from Rome so they should expect to see him in the future.

Then he sends greetings from the rest of the believers who are their working with him and supporting Him, and its interesting to note that Paul starts this list with Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, to whom he has shown grace and has

extended a second chance to prove himself as useful to the ministry.

You might remember that Barnabas and Paul took Mark with them on an early mission trip and Mark bailed out on them and fled back home. Paul was ready to give up on Mark and did not allow him to come on the next mission trip, but Barnabas wanted to show him grace and give him a second chance. Paul did not agree and as a result Paul and Barnabas had a falling out and went their separate ways...

I think Paul includes Mark first in this list to make reference to that incident and show he can sympathize with the position Philemon finds himself in, but the fact that Mark is now included as a faithful gospel worker is evidence that it is better to forgive and give second chances when someone of good Christian character vouches for them. Paul does not want to see Philemon make the mistake with Onesimus that he himself had made with Mark.



Thus Paul ends the letter with a reference to the only thing that can change our hearts to give people who have broken our trust and wronged us a second chance... Paul states *“the grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit!”* If Paul’s appeal in this letter is successful it is because the grace of Jesus is at work in Philemon and the Colossian congregation in the same way that Paul is vouching it is at work in Onesimus.

Which is what Paul reminds them about in his other letter that he sent to them, Colossians 3:13 he tells them *“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”* This all hinges on the grace of Jesus Christ.

So brothers and sisters now that we know the context and backstory to this letter its much easier to see how it is a useful part of scripture that can be used to teach, rebuke, correct and train us in applying the spiritual reality of forgiveness in Christ to the awkward and delicate situations in our lives where someone has betrayed us, broken our trust, racked up

debt for us, shamed our reputation, put us through a great deal of pain and suffering...

Because the more we apply this in practical ways to such situation in our lives, the more we are equipped with credibility for the good work of gospel ministry – sharing the good news about the forgiveness we receive from Christ Jesus with those who do not yet know about it, with those who need to hear it, even with those who would be offended by the notion that we humans have to seek forgiveness from God.

And when we speak of forgiveness from God, and unbelievers can see that incredible acts of forgiveness have taken place in our lives, it proves that we know what we are talking about. It proves the truth of what God is offering us in Christ, because only someone who has truly received that kind of forgiveness from God can extend that kind of forgiveness to others – where it seems impossible or improbable or unnatural for forgiveness to take place. It becomes part of the testimony that you share... and that we all share together...

And it becomes even more powerful when the person has become a believer and you can both speak to the unifying and reconciling power of Jesus Christ which brought you together.

Brothers and sisters, both the Apostle Paul and pastor Timothy know this, and that is why they are writing this letter and sending Onesimus back to Philemon and the Colossian congregation and this is why in vs. 6 of this letter, which is the key verse, Paul states he is praying this would happen. He prays that Philemon's and the Colossian's *"partnership with him in the faith may be effective in deepening their understanding of every good thing they share for the sake of Christ"*

Paul is asking them to do something that goes against common sense and custom and their legal rights... but he is counting on the fact that their support of his gospel ministry would give them a deeper understand of the situation to see past those things to what God was doing for the sake of advancing the gospel - in the life of a slave, in the life of a master, in the life of a congregation... and if this prayer was

answered – also in the lives of those whom Paul and Onesimus would reach working together! There is much more at stake here than a wronged master – if one has the ability to see it.

So, brothers and sisters, do you have a brother or sister in Christ to whom you need to be reconciled to for the sake of Christ? For the sake of the gospel? Do you need to extend forgiveness to someone – Christian or not – in order to be able to demonstrate that you are able to forgive others as Christ has forgiven you?

Brothers and sisters, my prayer with this message is the same as Paul's – that our common goal of wanting to make disciples at Valleyview would cause you to seek a deeper understanding of how God can work though your circumstances to accomplish that.

And I wish I could be as subtle and nuanced and gentle as Paul is in this letter in encouraging you... don't look at the situation where you need to offer forgiveness through the perspective of your experiences, or your legal rights, or human rights, or

whatever perspective it may be... but look at through the perspective of Christ. Everything for the sake of the gospel Christ – that amazing forgives.

That is going deeper in our understanding of every good thing we share in Christ. That's how we know the Lord is bringing about an answer to Paul's prayer in our lives. That is what we share together as partners in the gospel.

So may this be effective and useful letter in our lives as we grow deeper in our understanding of receiving forgiveness in Christ. Amen.