

# The Book of Philemon

## Applications for Today

The book of Philemon is a short 25-verse letter that the apostle Paul has written to a man named Philemon. Philemon appeared to be a wealthy man who owned slaves in the city of Colossi (cf. Phile. 1:16). Philemon was also a Christian and an active worker in the kingdom of God, both teaching lost and edifying the saved (cf. Phile. 1:6-7). This letter to Philemon concerns a slave by the name of Onesimus who had escaped his servitude in Colossi leaving work undone (Phile. 1:15). Onesimus had a “do-nothing” reputation while with Philemon (Phile. 1:11). Onesimus ran into Paul at Rome during the years of 61 to 63 AD and was converted (Phile. 1:10). Though Onesimus was once an “*unprofitable*” servant in labor, Paul revealed that he had now become a profitable laborer in the kingdom of God (cf. Phile. 1:11). Paul sent this letter to Philemon by the hands of Tychicus and Onesimus (see Date of Epistle below) in hopes that Philemon would not only forgive Onesimus for leaving his duties behind but also receive him into full Christian fellowship (cf. Phile. 1:17).

### Date of Epistle:

There is ample evidence in the New Testament to identify the time of writing to be during Paul’s first imprisonment at Rome; i.e., AD 61 – 63 AD. Paul had said, “*All my affairs shall Tychicus make known unto you, the beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord: whom I have sent unto you for this very purpose, that ye may know our state, and that he may comfort your hearts; together with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things that are done here*” (Col. 4:7-9). These words reveal that Philemon and Onesimus were residents of Colossi and that Paul probably wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon at the same time, having Tychicus and Onesimus deliver the epistles (cf. Eph. 6:21-22).

### Lessons Learned from Philemon:

Brethren ought to be cautious when making a determination as to who they can fellowship in Christ and who they cannot. Paul knew that Philemon was a spiritual man who would in no way give any sinners the right hand of fellowship unless he knew their spirit (i.e., character, disposition, and teaching [cf. Gal. 1:6-8]). Philemon knew Paul to be a spiritual man of love and faith and could thereby trust his judgment of individuals. Paul leaned heavily upon Philemon’s knowledge of him (note that Paul did not begin the letter with his usual “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” Paul’s relationship with Philemon was such that he did not have to say such a thing because Philemon had knowledge of the fact).

The first lesson that I learn from Philemon is that when I determine to give another the right hand of fellowship, I have made a serious move and assessment of this man’s spiritual state of being (cf. I Jn. 4:1-6; II Jn. 9-11). Philemon would have in no way immediately received Onesimus into Christian fellowship if it were not for the clear admonitions of Paul to do so (cf. Phile. 1:17). Righteous judgment of others is a part of each individual Christian’s obligation (cf. John 7:24).

Secondly, I learn that it is okay for another individual or church to write a letter of commendation (or condemnation) regarding the spiritual state of another. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon that he may know that Onesimus was not the same “do-nothing” sinner that had originally left him (cf. Phile. 1:10-11). The church in Ephesus composed a letter on behalf of Apollos that the brethren in Achaia would receive him into Christian fellowship (cf. Acts 18:24-28). Paul told us that when we emulate him (he wrote a letter of recommendation on the part of one Christian to be received into Christian fellowship by other Christians) the God of peace shall be with us (cf. Phil. 4:9).

Thirdly, we learn what it means to forgive and forget. Onesimus had obviously wronged Philemon by leaving him and having a “do-nothing” reputation (cf. Phile. 1:11, 15). Philemon could easily, in a spirit of bitterness, respond to Paul’s letter with anger. We are not told what Philemon’s response to the letter was; however, we do know that Paul felt that he knew Philemon well enough to judge that he would forgive and receive Onesimus (cf. Phile. 1:21). We should expect no less of each other. If one has wronged me and asked

me to forgive them, I should be ready and willing to do so with a spirit of great joy (cf. Matt. 18:15; Lk. 6:37; 17:3).