

Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson 4

Paul and Philemon

Lesson Guide



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read the book of Philemon.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

II. Background (1:31)

A. People (2:46)

1. Philemon (3:14)

Philemon was likely a resident of Colossae, a small city in the Lycus Valley near the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:9).

Paul thought so highly of Philemon that he spoke of Philemon as his partner in gospel ministry (v. 17).

Philemon seems to have had a significant history with Paul that formed a strong bond between them (v. 19, 22).

2. Onesimus (6:35)

Onesimus was Philemon's bondservant — *doulos* (δοῦλος) in Greek — meaning “servant” or “slave.”

Slavery was so common in the Roman Empire that as much as one third of the population consisted of various sorts of slaves.

Some slaves were uneducated, performing menial tasks, but others were educated, serving as managers, accountants, or tutors.

Destitute individuals often sold themselves into slavery for security, food and shelter or even to raise money for the sick and poor.

Roman law allowed slaves to earn money, own property, even have their own slaves, and be allowed to purchase their freedom from their masters.

Onesimus was Philemon's slave, or bondservant and a member of Philemon's household but was not a believer early on.

Paul referred to Onesimus as his "child" because he had brought him to faith in Christ and developed a fatherly love for him (vv. 10-12).

3. Witnesses (11:17)

Paul mentioned a number of familiar witnesses that he probably thought might help him in his appeal to Philemon:

- Apphia and Archippus (vv. 1-2)

Apphia was likely a member of Philemon's household — probably his wife.

Archippus was likely a person of some influence over Philemon, whether as a local pastor or as part of Philemon's household.

- Epaphras (vv. 23-24)

Epaphras established the church in Colosse; the churches of the Lycus Valley sent him to minister to Paul in prison.

Epaphras had a keen interest in making sure that Philemon would respond properly to Paul's letter.

B. Problem (13:43)

The name "Onesimus" is derived from a Greek word *oninēmi* meaning "helpful" but Onesimus had been an unhelpful or unprofitable slave (v. 1).

Onesimus may actually have caused a significant loss for Philemon (v. 18).

Under Roman law, a master had the right to punish slaves severely, even with heavy beatings, so Onesimus fled in fear.

God had a positive reason for allowing the situation (v. 15).

The law permitted slaves to leave their masters temporarily to find an advocate or mediator.

If Onesimus fled in order to ask Paul to be his advocate and mediator with Philemon, he was not a fugitive.

Onesimus had caused some loss to Philemon, and this problem was compounded by the resulting tension between Onesimus and Philemon.

C. Mediation (20:15)

1. Onesimus' Petition (20:27)

Some scholars conclude that Onesimus was seeking to start a new life far from Philemon and encountered Paul only accidentally.

Scripture provides some details suggesting that Onesimus sought out Paul as his advocate:

- Onesimus knew where Paul was as the church at Colossae had sponsored Epaphras' mission to care for Paul in prison (Colossians 4:12-13).
- Onesimus pursued a meeting with Paul.
- Onesimus pursued Paul's advocacy.
- Onesimus had endeared himself to Paul, staying with him long enough to secure his advocacy.

2. **Paul's Agreement (23:32)**

Paul acknowledged our duty in relationship to the civil rulers (Romans 13:4).

Godly authority figures carry out appropriate punishments because it is the right thing to do.

Onesimus turned to his master's friend for help, and Paul did not agree to mediate until the freedman had proven his repentance and good intent.

While Onesimus stayed with Paul to demonstrate his good intent, Paul preached the gospel to him and the Holy Spirit brought him to faith in Christ.

Onesimus might legally have remained with Paul without being a fugitive, but the Christian values of charity and reconciliation demanded Onesimus to return to Philemon (vv. 12-16).

Paul wanted Philemon's voluntary — as opposed to compulsory — agreement, and for Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled as brothers in Christ.

III. Structure and Content (30:15)

A. Salutation, Philemon 1-3 (31:52)

Paul identifies himself as the primary author of the letter, includes an address that names Philemon as the letter's primary recipient, and mentions several others who were to bear witness.

Paul invited Philemon's household and church to witness his advocacy for Onesimus.

B. Thanksgiving, Philemon 4-7 (33:28)

Paul acknowledged Philemon's love for the church and thanked the Lord for the ways Philemon had blessed his fellow believers in Colossae.

Philemon had served the church well and because Onesimus had become part of the church, Paul hoped that Philemon would show him the same love (Colossians 3:12-14):

Onesimus had wronged Philemon but Paul asked Philemon to bear up patiently under the wrong he had suffered, to forgive rather than punish, and to be consistent in his character.

C. Petition, Philemon 8-21 (37:04)

The petition represents the main purpose of the letter, namely advocating on behalf of Onesimus before Philemon.

1. Paul as Advocate, Philemon 8-10 (37:22)

Paul had the authority to order Philemon to do the right thing but rather he elicited Philemon's sympathy and concern.

Paul referred to his weakness demonstrating another side of Paul that we do not see often in his other letters (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Paul constantly strove to be like Christ, who also knew when to be forceful and when to be humble (Philippians 2:5-8).

2. Onesimus as Petitioner, Philemon 11-13 (41:43)

Paul described Onesimus as a very different man from the one who had come to him asking for a mediator.

Paul's wordplay in Philemon 11-13 emphasizing the change in Onesimus :

- Onesimus was “useless” (*achrēstos*) when he was “without Christ” (*achristos*)
- He became very “useful” (*euchrēstos*) when he received “Christ” (*Christos*) as his Lord

Onesimus was taking Philemon's place in service to Paul while he was in prison.

Onesimus was returning to Colossae to petition Philemon for mercy hoping for reconciliation and possibly release (v. 12).

3. Philemon as Master, Philemon 14 (45:45)

Paul acknowledged Philemon's legal authority over Onesimus.

Paul wanted Philemon to choose to do the right thing so Paul's petition came as a request rather than as an apostolic command.

If Philemon treated Onesimus well, it would provide greater encouragement both to Paul and to the church (vv. 7-9).

4. God as Ruler, Philemon 15, 16 (49:49)

Paul reflected on the greater good that God might bring out of Onesimus' sin, if Philemon would only grant his request.

Paul suggested that God had orchestrated events to bring Onesimus and Philemon into conflict so that Onesimus would seek Paul's advocacy.

5. Twofold Petition, Philemon 17-20 (52:17)

Paul's twofold petition was Philemon asking him to forgive Onesimus while offering himself as a substitute in the event that Philemon chose to exact payment or recompense from his slave.

Paul didn't simply didn't stand *beside* Onesimus as his defense attorney, but rather, stood *in front of* Onesimus as his spiritual father and protector.

Paul asked Philemon to "benefit" him using the Greek verb "*oninémi*" (ὀνίνημι).

Paul asked Philemon to "benefit" him by being kind to Onesimus, just as Onesimus himself had benefited Paul.

Paul appealed to Philemon, encouraging him to refresh Paul during his imprisonment, just as he had refreshed those in Colossae.

Some believe that Paul was asking Philemon for Onesimus' manumission, that is, his freedom.

Paul did not teach that Christian faith required all Christian masters to free their slaves:

- freedom was preferable to slavery, but he never insisted on manumission (1 Corinthians 7:21).
- Christian masters to be sure to treat Christian servants and slaves as their brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Timothy 6:2).

Slavery has been an institution of terrible abuse throughout history, i.e., chattel slavery.

Neither Paul nor any other biblical author would have affirmed these practices but would have instead condemned them.

But in Paul's setting, slavery or servitude was often a mutually beneficial economic arrangement, especially when both master and bondservant were Christians.

Paul did not instruct Christians to remove this social institution but taught them to treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

6. Confidence, Philemon 21 (1:03:51)

Paul believed that Philemon would do as he asked because he knew Philemon respected and loved Paul and he loved the church.

Scripture does not record Philemon's response, or tell us what happened to Onesimus.

The fact that we still have Paul's letter implies that Philemon did the right thing, since he probably would have destroyed it if he had not granted Paul's request.

D. Final Greetings, Philemon 22-25 (1:05:50)

Paul expected to be released from prison rather quickly, and asked Philemon to prepare a room for him (v. 22).

Epaphras served as a remote witness to the Philemon's resolution of the matter with Onesimus (v. 23).

IV. Modern Application (1:06:52)**A. Accountability (1:08:09)**

Paul called on several individuals as witnesses to his advocacy likely to encourage Philemon to do the right thing.

Paul taught that Christians are to expose sins — “the unfruitful works of darkness” — by bringing them into the light (Ephesians 5:11-15).

We are wise to walk in the light, that is, to remain in close, open fellowship with other believers who will lovingly expose our sin and keep us from shame.

Paul pointed to the wisdom of accountability, acknowledging that when others know what we are doing, we are less likely to succumb to temptation.

God historically sought to turn people from sin by warning that their sins would be exposed, and they would suffer shame and disgrace:

- Habakkuk 2:16
- Ezekiel 7:18

One way to keep from sinning is for fellow believers to hold each other accountable by staying in open, loving fellowship.

When we are tempted to do the wrong thing, encouraging words from other believers can keep us from sinning (Ephesians 5:19).

We are to hold one another accountable through the mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21).

B. Compassion (1:15:37)

1. Kindness (1:16:59)

Paul taught all believers to show kindness and charity when he praised Philemon for his ministry and appealed to these as the basis for his petition (vv. 7-9).

We must treat other believers as we would our Lord, and as our Lord has treated us (Colossians 3:11-12).

Modern Christians must be moved by pity and love for those in the church, and we must respond to their needs so far as we are able.

2. Intercession (1:19:54)

Intercession takes various forms: expressing an opinion or even giving up one's life to protect another who is guilty (vv. 17-19).

Paul's example calls for all of us to intercede for other believers in similar ways (Ephesians 5:1-2).

C. Reconciliation (1:21:44)

Paul spoke frequently of reconciliation between believers, individually and corporately, as an essential element of the Christian faith.

Paul insisted that both Onesimus and Philemon had an obligation to:

- Restore their relationship
- Embrace one another as brothers in Christ without holding grudges

Paul argued that the basis for conflicts among believers had been erased by Christ, so that all racial and ethnic strife in the church was invalid and therefore sinful (Ephesians 2:14-16).

Our Lord has removed any basis for conflict between us, so that we must recognize our strife as sin, and strive for unity, love and harmony in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13-15).

V. Conclusion (1:27:48)

9. Describe two aspects of compassion that Paul stressed as important in our relations with Christians.

10. How did Paul advocate reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon?

11. Summarize three main ways in which Paul's teaching to Philemon applies to the church.

Application Questions

1. What types of problems often require the mediation of an outside party? Have you ever faced a problem that required mediation?
2. With which person in this letter do you most identify: Paul, Philemon or Onesimus? Why?
3. Paul was an advocate for Onesimus and incurred a potential cost by defending him before Philemon. Who has been an advocate for you? For whom should you advocate?
4. What inspired Paul's advocacy for Onesimus?
5. Paul recognized that God is at work even in the midst of conflict and strife. How has this been true in your own experience?
6. Paul appealed to his friend Philemon on the basis of mercy. Why did he adopt this strategy? Which do you find easier to do: appeal for mercy or make demands?
7. How has forgiveness brought reconciliation to your life?
8. Onesimus and Philemon had to assume responsibility in order to restore their relationship. Is there any responsibility you need to assume in order to bring reconciliation to a fractured relationship?
9. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?