

### Paul Makes His Appeal for Onesimus

#### Philemon 1:8-17

Philemon 1:8-17: *“Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,<sup>9</sup> yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,<sup>11</sup> who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.<sup>12</sup> I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,<sup>13</sup> whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.<sup>14</sup> But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.<sup>15</sup> For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,<sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.<sup>17</sup> If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.”*

#### Background Notes

Philemon was a rather well to do Christian from Colosse. He probably had a large house, and the church at Colosse met in his home (v2). Because Philemon was well off, he had slaves - as did many other 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians. Slavery was an essential part of the fabric of society in the Roman Empire. It is estimated that there were as many as sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire.

When we read Paul’s letter to Philemon and other New Testament epistles where the subject of slavery is mentioned, our logical question is, “Why wasn’t slavery denounced in the New Testament?” And, “Why didn’t Paul tell Philemon in no uncertain terms to give Onesimus his freedom? In fact, why didn’t Paul tell Philemon (and all other slave owners) to release **all** their slaves?”

So what’s the answer? Why didn’t the New Testament authors say - in no uncertain terms - that slavery is wrong?

Rather than advocating that slaves should revolt, and rather than risking the breakdown of 1<sup>st</sup> century society by immediately releasing all slaves (who would then have no jobs or homes), the New Testament approached the problem of slavery by **denouncing the abuses** of slavery, and exhorting Christian masters to treat their slaves with kindness and fairness. In the long run, it was Christian principles, as they were worked out little by little in Roman society, that finally led to an end of slavery.

One other note: if Christian masters followed the New Testament directives (as found in Ephesians and Colossians), and treated their slaves with fairness and kindness, then those slaves would have been elevated to a status somewhat similar to an employee’s status in today’s society. In fact, in some ways the situation was even better than the

employer/employee relationship of today. Think about your employer providing your room and board and security, for example! That is why many slaves elected to stay with kind and fair masters, even after being granted their freedom.

In his letter to Philemon, Paul didn't demand that Philemon give Onesimus his freedom - but he strongly hinted at it!

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. "Friendly persuasion" can be biblical.

That principle is taught in Paul's letter to Philemon. Some kinds of "friendly persuasion" are not biblical, such as blackmail, white lies, or insincere flattery. Unethical arm-twisting and unscrupulous manipulation are certainly not biblical kinds of "friendly" persuasion! However, there is a biblical kind of friendly persuasion, and the apostle Paul used it here.

Onesimus was a runaway slave - but now had become a brother in Christ, so Paul's intent was to persuade Philemon not only to receive Onesimus back into his household without severe penalty, but possibly even to give Onesimus his freedom. As an apostle, Paul could have used his authority to command Philemon to do this - but he didn't. He didn't even "pull rank" by starting his letter with "*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ*" (his normal opening), but rather with "*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*"

Paul wanted to persuade Philemon as a friend and brother. He didn't want to command him as an apostle. Look at verses 8-9 again, "*Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you...*" And verse 14: "*But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.*" So, friendly persuasion is a good thing, as long as it's used ethically and within biblical guidelines.

Paul based his plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus on four things: Philemon's love, the change in Onesimus, God's sovereignty, and Paul's friendship

Let's look at the basis for Paul's plea in four sub-points:

#### **a. The basis of Philemon's love**

Verses 8-9: "*Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*"

Paul had already commended Philemon for his love for the saints (v5 & 7), so Paul appealed to Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly, based on that love. After reading that line, it would have been pretty hard for Philemon to throw the book at Onesimus.

When Paul said he was “aged” (v9), he was about 60 years old. I’m 61 now - so I guess that makes me aged! However, the point is that Paul was appealing to Philemon on the basis of love and respect, not on authority and command.

## **b. The basis of change in Onesimus.**

Verses 10-13: *“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.”*

This is the first mention of Onesimus in the book! Can you imagine Philemon’s surprise at this point? There’s a play on words in verse 11: the name “Onesimus” means “profitable” or “useful.” Paul told Philemon that Onesimus was once useless, but he had now become useful to Philemon - and to Paul as well. Onesimus was a changed man!

Paul then told Philemon that he had led Onesimus to the Lord Jesus as Savior, and he guaranteed that Onesimus was a changed man as a result of trusting in Jesus. In fact, he had already proved himself to be useful, and Paul would have liked to keep him in the Lord’s service in Rome. However, he was sending Onesimus back to Philemon because that was the right thing to do. Now the ball was in Philemon’s court. What would he do?

## **c. The basis of God’s sovereignty.**

Verses 14-16: *“But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary. For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”*

Paul reminded Philemon that God is sovereign, and that ***nothing happens by chance!*** Paul said that perhaps God had allowed Onesimus to “depart” from Philemon for a while so that he could get to Rome, be saved, and then come back to Philemon as a brother. And in essence Paul said - Guess what, Philemon? Onesimus is going to be your brother forever – so get used to it! (Don’t you love the friendly persuasion that Paul used here?)

Notice that Paul did not use inflammatory words like “runaway thief” or “scoundrel.” Rather, he used tactful (but truthful) phrases like “he departed for a while.” Paul believed that God had worked all the events of Onesimus’ life together - even the wrongdoing - for the purpose of bringing Onesimus to salvation.

That point is still true today. God certainly doesn’t condone wrongdoing - but He is able to work through evil and wrong to accomplish His purposes. Ephesians 1:11 says that God works **all** things after the counsel of His will! So even though it was wrong for Onesimus to run away from Philemon, God had worked through this.

The wrongdoing was not condoned. God never condones wrongdoing, but He works through it to accomplish His sovereign purposes. Think, for example, of how God brought about the amazing ministry of Prison Fellowship through Charles Colson's imprisonment after his involvement in the Watergate scandal. God works *all* things after the counsel of His will.

#### **d. The basis of Paul's friendship.**

Verse 17: *"If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me."*

In other words, Philemon, if we're really fellow workers and partners in Christ, then receive Onesimus back in the same way you would receive me if I showed up at your home! Or, to put it another way: if you don't receive brother Onesimus back as you would receive me, how can we be fellow workers and partners in the work of the Lord?

On the basis of these four points – Philemon's love, the change in Onesimus, God's sovereignty, and Paul's friendship – Paul used friendly persuasion to appeal to Philemon for Onesimus. So - friendly persuasion can be biblical!

### **Practical Application**

#### **Remember - we don't always have to use authority to motivate people**

Paul could have used his apostolic authority to command Philemon - but he didn't. He used friendly persuasion instead. And, as far as we know, it worked! We should use friendly persuasion as much as possible, even when we're in a position of authority and could call the shots. Rather than using command, we can try friendly persuasion.

At a Christian summer camp for teens, I was involved in coming up with the "dress code" for the camp. After all, you can't allow bare feet in the dining hall, and you've got to set some standards for the minimum amount of coverage in a swimsuit. Rather than use our authority and pronounce a bunch of rules about dress code, we chose instead to appeal to the kids by "friendly persuasion." In a series of humorous skits acted out by the senior staff, we suggested what we were looking for as to an acceptable dress code for a Christian camp. And - can you believe - it worked! Friendly persuasion worked.

Friendly persuasion can work in families as well. Dads, you don't have to boss everyone around! As a loving and caring father, you can try friendly persuasion to prompt your teens to follow the family's rules. And friendly persuasion can work in the church setting, too. Church leaders should realize that friendly persuasion will often motivate people to cooperate – and it usually works much better than issuing commands or "pulling rank."

Remember - we don't always have to use authority to motivate people.