

BREAKING BARRIERS

Philemon

Thoughts come from a wide variety of sources. Some from messages I have heard from individuals, some from assemblies Bible studies, some from home life and some from books I have read. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher who makes them real to me.

- "Titus and Philemon," by D. Edmond Hiebert, Moody Press
- "What the Bible Teaches, Philemon" by A. McShane, John Ritchie Ltd.
- "The Life Application Bible." Tyndale House and Zondervan

Philemon 1-3

THE INTERCESSOR

In almost every society and culture in the world people are divided in some way: rich and poor, old and young, male and female, Jew and Gentile. Furthermore, people are expected to stay in the place and position the barriers of society have formed. However, into all these divided groups something new has come - Christianity as it is intended to be. Paul wrote to the Colossian assembly a clear statement as to the result of the Gospel message when one becomes a new person in Christ. "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, Sythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all in all." Now every believer in Christ is in the family of God no matter what is their station in the world. This reality is best understood by reading the personal letter of Paul to Philemon. The message of this letter for us is an illustration of the practice of Christian forgiveness enforced and illustrated.

Philemon must have come into contact with Paul in Ephesus or some other place, because Paul had not been to Colossae where Philemon lived. He was likely saved when Paul led him to the Lord in the place where he was preaching, and then Philemon returned to Colossae where the gathering place of the assembly was his home. The name Philemon means "affection" indicating he had interest in others and what was happening in their lives. In Christ, God's people are family, "one in the Lord," and the walls of gender, social and economic position, race and culture are broken down. God's grace transcends all barriers and we need to recognize that Christian relationships lead us to full acceptance and respect for one another.

This was a new human concept in New Testament times, but this fact is best described in this small epistle. Actually, this is even more personal than the letters to Timothy and Titus which had more to do with servants in the assembly and public service. This epistle brings important truths right into home life. Our homes are where the reality of our Christian profession is best seen. The husband-wife relationship, the parent-children relationships and those of employer and employee are on display hour after hour, day after day continually through our lifetime. There is no way to fake our faith or lack of it, when we are under constant observation. Our oneness in Christ removes the barriers that separate us from others and places us as sons and daughters of God in His family.

Philemon must have been a man of means to have a house big enough for the assembly at Colossae to meet there for their assembly functions. He also was a slave owner so whatever business he had, it was larger than he, his wife Apphia, and his family could handle on their own. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, must have taken something that belonged to his master [v.18] when he ran away. By the grace of God, Onesimus met Paul in Rome and was saved. What does a new believer in Christ owe in relation to his past life? There are some things we cannot do anything about that happened in the past because of a sinful lifestyle. However, when restitution is possible, it is only right that it be done. In this way the reality of Christian testimony is established. This personal letter to Philemon carried by Onesimus, and the letter to the Colossians in the assembly carried by Tychicus, both from Paul, would likely have come at the same time. I imagine when these two men showed up at Philemon's house, there was a real conflict of emotions. A runaway slave who could legally be put to death, and an emissary of the great apostle Paul standing in front of Philemon would have been startling to say the least. What should I do? Put Onesimus in chains? But those two men had been travelling companions. I expect Philemon read the letter Onesimus carried first and likely as he held out his hand to take the letter Onesimus stood with his head down in a humble attitude. All would be quietly waiting as the letter was read and the contents digested.

The letter itself is a remarkable example of tact and grace as a testimony to the power of Christian fellowship, when Christ is living in the hearts and lives of His people. A messenger of God who received a direct commission from our Lord Jesus Christ; a man of means and high social standing; and a converted slave who had nothing but a letter to deliver, were all brought together because each had placed personal faith in Christ. We look around us often and marvel at those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We

enjoy life and fellowship together and are amazed at all we have in common with those of divergent backgrounds, because we know we are "one in Christ." The joy that we have because of the grace of God is a testimony to angels, a defeat to the powers of darkness and a conundrum to those who do not know our Savior.

So how do these divergent personalities come together in unity? Only through divine intervention in the life of each one. A Jewish scholar, a Greek businessman and a slave are all united in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is on that note that Paul begins this personal letter. He is a prisoner it is true, but the only designation is he is "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Only in this epistle does he go to the highest possible authority, beyond that of an apostle to Christ Jesus (a more appropriate order in most Bible versions). He is a prisoner of Christ Jesus with the authority, dignity and reverence that is associated with that name. It is because of that relationship he is in prison and is not making complaints. As a spiritual father of both Philemon and Onesimus he is making an appeal to his spiritual son in the faith, Philemon, for his spiritual son in the faith, Onesimus. This kind of intercession would be very hard to resist. A man would have to be pretty hard-hearted to ignore such an appeal.

The first line of his letter would stir sympathy in Philemon and also stir his conscience regarding Paul's request. Even further is the fact that he includes Timothy as the second witness as to what he has to say. Timothy would also have been known to Philemon, and now also to Onesimus. His interest in Philemon's response would be the same as Paul's. Neither Paul nor Timothy were groveling to gain sympathy for their request. Rather the prisoner is linked with the glory of heaven where the Supreme Intercessor sits at "the right hand of the majesty on high."

With a tactful approach because of their fellowship, Paul addresses Philemon as "dearly beloved." This is not some kind of flattery but is the attitude of any servant of God toward one who they were instrumental in bringing to Jesus. This is sincere love for an affectionate brother of noble character and practical hospitality. These characteristics are without reproach when we see them in our brothers and sisters. An encouraging word to another person like this is always in order. Their cause was the same because they were fellow-laborers even though they were doing different things in different places. The cause of Christ affects all of us who loves the Lord and His people. We appreciate all we hear of, when we see the work in which our fellow-laborers are engaged. This one of the values of this letter to us in that it reveals Paul's character as a man who was courteous, loveable, humble, holy and unselfish. His tact and wisdom are examples to us when he mentions he was a prisoner and acknowledges Philemon's excellence while delaying mentioning Onesimus so he can pave the way for his request.

This interest extends to other members of our family, as in the case of Apphia, Philemon's wife. As "our sister" she not only was his wife but as a Christian would be a participant in the work of the Lord with Philemon, Archippus (probably an elder), a spiritual soldier in the warfare against the powers of darkness arrayed against them in Colossae. The work of the Lord is an on-going conflict in which individuals, and the "church in thy house" are committed. However, that is the extent to which the contents of this letter were to be made known. When we are part of an assembly, we need to remember some things discussed are only the business of those involved in the matter; and to the extent it is affected, the assembly of which these are a part.

Grace and peace were common expressions of greeting when there were both Greeks and Jews in the fellowship. "Grace (charis) was a common Greek word used in greeting that really invokes God's blessing. "Peace" (shalom) was a Jewish word used in greeting that includes that which is good and blessed as well as a state of mind or condition in which we are found. Put together the grace that brings God's favor upon us and the peace that comes as a result of grace, is a very significant form of greeting.

Add to that the fact that it is from two equal Persons of the Godhead who are unified in this matter, and this short letter takes on a powerful and authoritative tone. This is not a simple note making a suggestion. It is important for us to remember that nothing we do in our lives is of no value. Everything has its consequences. The way I write a letter or the way I read a letter dealing with biblical truth, is not something I can take lightly. Things I am asked to do by those who are before me; I cannot lightly refuse nor discount their importance. It may be that at first my reaction to a matter may be one way, but upon reflection and prayerful consideration, my reaction was not right. "Grace" indicates there is a full supply of everything I need to deal with a matter. "Peace" comes after prayer, thanksgiving and putting on all that belong to the new man. "Then "the peace of God rules in the heart [Col.3:15].

It is deep in the heart of a soul-winner, concern and love that remains
He remembers the ones who listened well, and when they salvation claimed

Even though we don't know all they do, or even where they might live
The joy both preacher and convert had, is a blessing that God alone gives.

The blessing of a common faith is something all Christians share
The grace of God alone can save, no works with grace can compare
Our faith is planted on the solid rock of God's inspired word
That then directs to faith's Supreme Objective, Jesus Christ our Lord.

One man in prison, one slave set free, one businessman all share this in common
The new life in Christ each personally received when by God's grace He saved them
One man a Jew, and one man a Greek, the other one from some place obscure
All have this new nature, new life does give, eternal life in each one is secure.

We see them come today from different places, blessed by grace and peace
The barriers and conflicts once they had between them, now in Christ has ceased
They find their joy and fellowship is something to be highly cherished
Unity and harmony are nurtured now, which previously would long have perished.

"Father, this letter speaks to me in a convicting way. Paul was such a gentleman - thoughtful, gracious and humble, yet authoritative when he wrote to Philemon. I would like to have some of those characteristics when I deal with others. There are beloved fellow-laborers with whom I would like to share our labors and with whom I would like to be able to communicate significantly. Amen."

Philemon 4-7

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

There is something very special when one brother in Christ commends the character of another in conversation with other people. Even more, when one give praise and mentions to another the fact he is praying for him, that is significant. When one actually commends and habitually gives thanks to God for his brother, that is of great value. Paul did all of this in his communication with Philemon. His praise and prayer for Philemon was not to soften his heart to receive Onesimus, but was a genuine, honest and sincere response to a friend and brother in Christ. Paul was not a scheming, subtle underhanded person. Thanksgiving is a good place to start whenever we think about a brother or sister no matter who they are. This practice can become a habit that lifts my own spirit and keeps me from being critical. Actually, it should become more than a habit, but a way I control my thoughts and feelings toward others. In this way I can look at people and their labors or situations in life and be effective in my intercession on their behalf.

Joy and thanksgiving in one's heart at thoughts of another person, warms our soul and gives incentive to say and do what is right ourselves. Paul's prayer to God for Philemon was personal and was continual. He was grateful for the man himself and was specific in his thanksgiving for him when he was in the presence of God. His prayer was to God. God was real to him and Paul could rely on God's interest in times of joy and sorrow. His prayer was very personal. "I thank *my* God," indicates he had a conscious and personal relationship with God that was meaningful to him. His personal thanksgiving to God was for the evidence of God's on-going work of grace in his brother Philemon. When we see evidence of God working in and through those we led to Christ, we are extremely thankful. This thankfulness is like a gift from God to us. Devotion and praise to God comes first before we intercede for others.

The ministry of intercessory prayer is an on-going and ever-expanding work for us. People, places and practices are all objects of this ministry. Older saints who may be physically limited can be at this work for the Lord as often as they want to and wherever they are. The circumstances in which we are found are never limiting to this service for God and His people. Philemon had two excellent qualities that Paul mentions here. He doubtless had many others, but the two he writes about here should be in us all. Love and faith "toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints" are two characteristics that indicate real divine life. "If any man, love not our Lord Jesus Christ, let him be (accursed)." "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren."

In this particular place the order of love first and then faith is something like when we look at a flower. We see the results in the blossom, like we see the evidence of love, and know that the root is working unseen to produce that effect, as does faith work to produce evidence of love. In this reading we see the results before the cause. Love is the outward showing of inward faith. It is the visible result of on-going faith. The object of faith is our Lord Jesus. The object of love is the saints. Paul is leading up to the place where Philemon has opportunity to show the reality of his faith by showing love to Onesimus. He has shown this to "all saints." Now he will be able to show this to a runaway slave who has returned back to his master.

Paul had heard good reports of Philemon and had good cause for thanksgiving because of them. They probably came from Epaphras who had come to Rome, and maybe other believers who were acquainted with Philemon also mentioned this brother favorably. Perhaps even Onesimus who was a new believer now had good words to say about his master whom he had wronged. Our "love for all saints" will be tested when we have been wronged or when we feel we have been unjustly criticized. But when our faith is deeply rooted in Christ Jesus, we will find that such love can be truly demonstrated. Faith actually works out visibly through love. Faith in Christ is a great motivation to produce the fruit of love in one's life. Faith sees the holiness of God in our Lord Jesus who gave Himself for us because "the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me." That same "love of God that is shed abroad in our hearts" demonstrates the reality of our Lord Jesus Christ to others through us. Love takes on visible, tangible expressions when it is directed to those right where we are. The saints are here, the time is now and the scope is "all saints" - even "Onesimus" is included.

The sharing of faith promotes the knowledge of all that is good in Christ Jesus. "Communicating" is simply sharing our faith by showing practical acts of kindness that demonstrates love for the saints. Feeding the hungry, comforting those who have lost loved ones, coming alongside of those who are sick or distressed are all ways we show evidence of growing in grace because of God at work in us. The life of a believer can lead others to know all the good that is in the Christian life and to use that influence and power to demonstrated the love of God in human flesh. This fellowship connects believers through acts of kindness and fruitfulness. Truth has a way of revealing God through the lives of believers who do what they do as unto Christ, for His glory, His honor and His praise.

News of Philemon's generosity and sacrificial love brought comfort to Paul when he was in the prison at Rome. It is always a privilege to lead a soul to Christ and it is greatly rewarding to hear of their faithfulness in serving the Lord themselves. Our actions affect other people and our influence extends farther than we might expect. Our potential for both good and evil is really not limited so we should be aware of the fact that we are representatives of our Lord wherever we are. Paul was obviously confident that forgiveness and love to Onesimus would be shown by Philemon. Love to the Lord's people and the blessing it brings to them brings joy and consolation to those who have invested themselves in the lives of those who follow the pattern of godly living they have been taught. Paul was given joy and encouragement by Philemon even though he was unaware of it. When we have a fuller understanding of all God has done for us, we are better able to respond in the right way toward those things that arise in our lives so that we can benefit others. My resources, faith and love open doors to blessing and service to others for the glory of God.

They are there, in far and distant places seeking souls for Jesus' sake
They are here, in my heart and mind as for them I intercession make
They are there, where people watch, and listen, and wonder if what they say is true
There are here, in my prayers as I ask God to help them and carry them through
The difficulties and pressures that are before them there to face
And I ask the Lord of the harvest to, for His sake, give them grace
To demonstrate the reality of the truth they do impart
So that the love of God through them, might reach to opened hearts.

I am here, for whatever reason God sees fit to get from me
I am here, with names and faces impressed on my mind indelibly
Who with faith, went forth to places and people yet unknown
That divine love and forgiveness through them to others will be shown
And in this way, though separated, I can share in the work they do
Knowing in a coming day those who sow, those who water, and reapers too
Will look on with wondering eyes to the multitudes on high
And find exceeding joy in results of faith, and the truth we did buy.

He is near, to guide and guard those who serve in Jesus' name
He is near to those who pray at home and in fellowship share the same
Response to grace by thanking our Lord for victories won
And giving Him all the glory for all in love that He has done
Love and faith are here in order because through love we here can see
All that faith unfeigned produces through prayers made intercessory
Hearts are opened, joy unfolds in lives that daily now demonstrate
All the blessings God has given to us all for Jesus' sake.

"Father, I believe joy is contagious when love and faith are joined together to bless the people. May prayer is that these characteristics of real Christianity may be seen in me today and every day. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

Philemon 8-21

THE ACTS OF THE INTERCESSOR

There was a sense in which Paul had a problem because he was dealing with a sensitive matter that required tact and wisdom. Sometimes to gain the result we want in a matter without leaving hurt and broken relationships behind, we have to get personally involved. Paul wanted to save Onesimus from punishment, and at the same time he wanted to conciliate Philemon without humiliating Onesimus. The process of reconciliation needs to be considered as to how best to bring it about. God had a plan for our reconciliation to Him and it came at a very high cost. Paul's strategy was to secure a mediator in Tychicus to go with Onesimus to Colossae and at the same time he carried a letter to the assembly. Tychicus could pave the way when he would present this personal letter to Philemon. Paul wrote this personal letter with such tact and courtesy, that it made it difficult for Philemon not to pardon and restore Onesimus and then commend him to the whole church. Colossians 4:9 indicates this letter was probably sent with the epistle of Colossians.

The ministry of reconciliation is one that requires knowledge of the problem and the people involved. It also affects us because we are going "to receive the things done in (the) body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." The "fear of the Lord" makes us realize how important this ministry is and should be done in a reverential, unselfish way consistent with "the love of Christ" that constrains us and the new birth that makes it normal for us to engage in this ministry. Reconciliation takes time and occasionally, suffering of some kind to bring it about. The paragraph in the middle of this letter is the heart of the letter where Paul comes to grips with the task of bringing restoration, restitution and reconciliation about. Skill and wisdom go well together when delicate issues have to be dealt with.

Paul wanted Philemon not to just obey his request, but to do so with a glad and open heart. Obedience only would make the master-slave relationship strained at best and merely a formal acquiescence. This letter reads as a friend would write, not an apostle; with earnest entreaty (refers to Onesimus as "my son," and assumes Philemon would do as he asked); frank acknowledgement of wrong done and a promise to make good the loss. Paul vouches of a thorough change and could guarantee ("unprofitable, but now profitable.") a change had taken place consistent with the new birth. On occasion he makes a congenial play on words and touches upon the divine aspect of God doing a sovereign work in them all. He makes a careful choice of words ("depart for a season."); mentioning the hope he had of being liberated and seeing Philemon.

The appeal Paul made was to the love Philemon had for him, and for his sake he wanted him to take Onesimus back. Private and domestic problems should be kept as close as possible to those who are directly involved. To bring things into the home that belong in the church creates confusion. In the same way to bring into the church things that belong at home is to expand something that should and could be kept small. Paul made his appeal based on him as an aged brother in Christ, and the fact that he was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. By the time Philemon read this far in the letter he may have been moved to tears for this man he loved in Christ, who had been used to lead him to the Lord for salvation. Now to his surprise he learns about another "son in the faith" with whom he was acquainted - Onesimus. God has His own way of working in different places with different people to bring about results that are way beyond coincidence.

In this paragraph of the letter, Paul refers to himself the one making the appeal, as a mediator and his qualifications for this role are the fact that he is "Paul the aged, and now a prisoner of Jesus Christ." Second, he gives a description of the one for whom his request is being made - in this case, Onesimus. Third, he explains his actions by giving an overview of the matter at hand and describing the solution. Last, he gives an overview of how God has guided in the matter. We learn from him that his attitude was to persuade people rather than use his authority. He knew the character of Philemon to whom he was writing the letter. He knew Philemon's love and acceptance of him. He also knew his authority as an apostle gave him the right to speak to him with "boldness" - frankness, and no hesitation for fear of offending him. But he knew in this case "boldness" in Christ was the basis of his appeal, and "for love's sake" he appealed to Philemon's love and grace.

His appeal as an intercessor, "Paul the aged," would have reached Philemon's heart as he remembered the man who had been shipwrecked, beaten, and lived with a "thorn in the flesh." He wasn't looking for sympathy but for appropriate Christian action from Philemon. As a prisoner of Christ Jesus, the One who had saved all three of those men, he makes plain the weakness of his age and the helplessness imposed by his bonds. Now he introduces a person as "my son," "my child" - a beloved one who needs care because his father is in chains. His name, "Onesimus," comes at the end of the sentence where as intercessor he makes his urgent appeal as one does for a suffering child, a fugitive slave, who is hopeless against the claims of Roman law. Other people need to know the extent of my interest in them is not just superficial and self-centered. There is something very appealing about a person who I know has my best interests at heart

because I can see the evidence of this in his interest in others. It may be in his attitude, his words, or his actions but there is something that appeals when love for others is obvious.

There is power in gentleness and grace that comes with the experiences of life. Courtesy and politeness go along with the approach of an effective intercessor who has the best interests of others at heart. Even in a meeting of elders or workers where there are differences of opinions, consideration must be given to those who have a right to express their mind regarding a matter. That does not mean that one is ignored by his brothers but there has been a respectful hearing given to his point of view even if it is not acted upon.

The use of the words "unprofitable" and "profitable" is a play on the name Onesimus that means, "profitable or helpful." The point the apostle is making is that he was a changed person since God saved him. He is a different man than he was before salvation. No longer is he an unprofitable runaway slave who may have stolen money or goods from his master. He was profitable to Philemon previously and now he was a profitable minister to Paul. Therefore, Paul's action was to send him back to his master in accordance to the law of the Romans. Conversion is genuine when we see changed attitudes and actions. Tychicus had probably presented the letter to Philemon and opened the way for the action Paul wanted Philemon to take. When a divisive issue arises in a business, assembly or family, we need to look for ways to bring about reconciliation, restitution and restore fellowship as gracefully as possible.

When God's people appreciate each other as those we love in Christ, when we lose them by death or for some other reason, it really affects us. Paul's strong word about Onesimus who had been helping him was, "mine own bowels," or in our words today it would be similar to the lose of "tearing my heart out." These two men greatly appreciated each other. Onesimus had served Paul on behalf of Philemon as far as Paul was concerned. But he could no longer use Philemon's servant without him knowing, otherwise it would have been stealing that which belong to another person. Consideration for the property of others as well as other people, is a principle to be practiced among God's people today. This example is a good one to follow. He was not going to violate Roman law. He was not going to create a legitimate complaint against Christians and he was going to make sure restitution was made.

There are new principles we live under as believers and one of the most significant ones is "the bonds of the Gospel." In this service there are lasting eternal benefits that are far more satisfying and freeing than independence. Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him as an assistant in the work he was doing but was not at liberty to do that because of Roman law. To be forced to act in kindness or do some work of kindness is not morally right because it is not true nor is it liberty. Kindness that is not freely and willingly given is not beautiful. The Gospel method of social reform, like bringing an end to slavery was not a project in which Paul was involved. The influence of the Gospel seeks to gain its end by persuasion rather than compulsion; by godliness rather than dynamite. To see the hand of God working in a matter is a blessing to all who are involved. Even in adverse circumstances God is working in divine sovereignty.

In this case God is comforting an aged prisoner, saving a bitter slave, giving back property to a Christian businessman in a far better condition than when it was lost. Paul suggested ("perhaps") there is a divine work going on among them all that would fulfill a higher purpose than any of them could expect. The providential dealing of God in our lives should not really surprise us, nor should it be overlooked or diminished in any way. No longer is the temporary bond of master and slave the only consideration in a matter. Now it is brothers and sisters in God's family forever. Philemon was "dearly beloved," and Onesimus was a "brother beloved" by "our beloved brother Paul." The new relationship of master and slave has an added dimension. Now it was brother and brother in the Lord. A whole new motive for living and serving has replaced the old life.

Who are these people who seem bound together in this Christian relationship?
There seems to be a love that binds them together that's more than companionship
Authority is there, but it is not strongly imposed with a heavy-handed force
And in their lives together, though each is different, they confidently stay the same course.

What do they have in common to maintain such close Christian partnership?
One labors in the harvest field enduring persecution and serious hardship
Another is profitable in the business field, and others labor at lowly tasks
Yet they have mutual trust in each other, and serve together without being asked.

How do they keep the continuity of on-going Christian fellowship?
There is love and grace demonstrated well, and solid faith that doesn't slip
Christ is the common attraction, and each one knows Him personally
And their communication is not based on worldly ways, but in view of eternity.

Those who though different, are the same and have experienced grace and love
The new nature they have been given by God is nourished by help from on high
Their hope is "built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness"
Their commitment to each other and their Lord, is that each knows God's forgiveness.

"Father in heaven, these personal thoughts that come from reading this epistle warm my soul towards those who are different, yet the same. I thank Thee for the good fellowship the have with brothers and sisters from different countries, races and cultures. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

When a person becomes a child of God there is a fundamental change so that he becomes more devoted and committed to labor "as unto the Lord." We have fellowship with others on the grounds of a "common faith." Paul used a bold approach when he said, "Receive him as myself." The Lord used similar words when He said, "He that receiveth Me receiveth Him that sent Me." We have been "Accepted in the Beloved" and should accept each other. Partnership doesn't mean that one is a guest, but one of equal standing before God. When Paul identified himself as a partner with Philemon, that was a powerful formal statement. Some simple statements we make about a matter are of greater value than a whole speech. Common fellowship, common interests, common feelings, common work and common faith bring us together and joins us in a meaningful way. For Philemon to refuse Onesimus after Paul interceded for him would be inconsistent within a partnership. To receive people as you would receive a loved one has great weight and meaning.

There is a significant analogy of redemption in this whole paragraph. Onesimus is a type of the sinner who runs away from God and robbed Him. The law gives no mercy but grace gives the right of appeal. He flees for refuge to Jesus whom God counts as a partner. He is begotten anew, and as a son, finds an Intercessor and a Father and is received as Christ Himself. The debt we owe has been put to Christ's account. Conversion doesn't cancel out the debts we owe other people, but rather a means of restitution should be made. Christ paid a debt for me "He did not owe." "Put that on my account" reminds us of the work of substitution Christ made for us. Paul accepts responsibility for any debts Onesimus owed which may have included stolen goods as well as stolen time while he was gone. To assume the debt of another makes one a debtor. Christ paid our debt. Paul paid Philemon's debt. Now he will pay Onesimus' debt. Reconciliation can be legally made when the cause of debt has been removed.

Paul was not making a playful, sly comment when referring to Philemon's debt to him. That would have been insincere and inappropriate for one who was an apostle. He had laid his hand to write these words himself as one who is sincere and who would pay Onesimus' debt. Philemon owed his spiritual life to Paul and Paul was not expecting payment from him. He also owed Paul for returning his slave in far better shape than when he left. Implied in Paul's words is "I know you will not demand payment for that which Onesimus owes you." If the time ever comes to us when we think we are not getting a fair deal from someone, we need to stop for a time and consider whether everyone we have dealt with got a fair deal from us. Honesty before God has a way of eliminating a lot of the problems that potentially could arise among God's people.

The address of "brother" to Philemon from the older brother Paul was an appeal to him to act in grace, receive Onesimus back, forgive him, restore him to his work and as a brother in Christ to him. Paul would be greatly refreshed in his heart and in the Lord, who does bring about reconciliation in the family of God. Reconciliation comes when we act in a Christ-like way towards others in a way appropriate to redeemed believers in Christ. He knew his friend would do above and beyond the request he made. There was likely no question about the outcome because Paul knew his friend. The fact that this letter is in the pages of the scriptures is enough to know that the result was what Paul expected. When we know a person well as a brother in Christ, and some charges are laid against him or some innuendo is raised, do not respond by condemnation but remember who he is and who he belongs to as a child of God. Do not accept every thing that others may say about your friend as being true.

Heartfelt obedience that is not grudgingly imposed, but is based on willingness, not authority. When acted upon in this way, it brings about reconciliation. There are some steps to reconciliation that we do well to remember and practice that we can learn from these men written about in the scripture. First, be willing to identify with those involved. The words used by Paul was "son" in reference to Onesimus and "brother" in reference to Philemon. Another step is to request, not order when you want some positive response. Third, when you want results, seek voluntary consent, not submission. Then, appeal with love and grace, not power and authority. Finally, be willing to take a loss yourself and to pay the cost of reconciliation. There are times when we must forgive to escape bitterness.

Three principles are taught in this personal letter from one older brother to another newer believer. Christian relationships are based on love - "I beseech." authority - Paul was a prisoner of Jesus Christ, he was a long-

time laborer in the work of the Lord, and he was an older man soon to die; and on life as in a spiritual Christian family with a "son" and a "brother." Another principle is Christian partnership based on labor. In Philemon's case the church met in his home where hospitality and prayer were practiced. It is also based on profit. A person who is unprofitable doesn't always remain that way. He is able to minister to others and mutual trust is established. A third principle is Christian fellowship based on love and faith to Christ who gave us salvation. Those who have received that grace have a desire for the word of God and want to obey our Lord. Christian fellowship is also directed to the saints when we communicate with them by exhorting, bearing burdens, and giving spiritual help. Showing confidence in our brothers and sisters and extending hospitality are both ways we demonstrate fellowship to each other.

Philemon 20. *"Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord."*

BROTHERS.

How does it happen - how can it be,
We're from different families, yet you're a brother to me?
This relationship we have is based on another -
When Christ became my Savior, you became my brother.

Brothers in Christ, have a bond that is common,
It really is greater than the work that we do.
It is because we are all sons of our heavenly Father,
And the kinship we share, by His love we can show.

Whether an older man like Paul, Timothy's spiritual father;
He was the father in faith of the other men too -
Yet in the reality of faith, Paul was also their brother,
Their fellowship based on the Father they knew.

Brothers' relationship is based on the new life we have,
When the Spirit of God, God's life did impart.
Brothers' partnership is proved when full trust we can give;
For brothers' in Christ are knit at the heart.

Brothers have fellowship with a foundation of faith.
There is love there for Christ and all of God's saints.
The bonds of the Gospel; meeting needs for Christ's sake,
Make us brothers beloved in the name that we take.

Brothers may not always agree about things;
There are differing opinions in our daily affairs.
But one thing about brothers, when needs at us spring -
Brothers will gather and a brother's burdens will bear.

I have many brothers that I've never met.
Some are from far away shores on this earth.
I will be so glad when in heaven we get -
And there, with our Father, celebrate our new birth.

"O Father of grace, who has made us Thy sons: in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I want to thank Thee now for being a part of Thy family. I know there are many of my brothers and sisters I have never met, but I rejoice over the promised hope of all gathering home in the morning at the Father's house. I wait for that day with gladness and joyful anticipation. Amen."

Philemon 22-25

PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT

There are some things among God's people that we should face that are occasionally overlooked. Our oneness in Christ as "the body of Christ" needs to be nurtured because there is a tendency to divide into groups that separate us. Our national heritage can create barriers between us and other saints simply because we have the same accent in our speech. Racial differences separate people when we do not share the same history and we dwell on our differences rather than our similarities. National pride is a barrier to Christian fellowship even though we share the same citizenship in heaven. These things are not of God and the result is barriers are in place that hinder our worship, our fellowship and our labor in the Gospel.

There was a variety of men with Paul when he was in prison in Rome that should help us see the value of unity of believers in the body of Christ. Paul and Mark were the only Jews in the group written about to

Philemon. Luke was from Troas in Mysia. Epaphras was from Colossae in Phrygia. Aristarchus from Thessalonica in Macedonia and likely Demas was from there also. Here is this divergent group of men all working together to further the Gospel, and all are sending their greetings to Philemon. In the work of God and in the body of Christ, every person is important because each one has a unique gift to use for the Lord for the benefit of the whole body.

Paul expected to be released from prison and planned to go to Colossae as soon as that delay was over. He was released in Rome shortly after writing this letter. Whether he was ever able to get to Colossae is not recorded in the scriptures. He did want to go there though, and likely wanted to see both Philemon and Onesimus "who is one of you" in happy fellowship in the assembly of God's people. He would likely have been gladly received into Philemon's home or at least been given the benefit of hospitality wherever he had "prepared a room." Hospitality being shown to others is a good testimony to the work of grace in the lives of God's people. Much of what we share when we have others in our homes is actually a learning time in which we minister to each other from the grace we have received. There are things we can often pass on privately in homes more effectively than we can or are given opportunity to, in a public meeting.

Paul's request for a room to lodge in would have added weight to his intercession for Onesimus who Paul obviously expected to be reinstated into Philemon's service. Now as a brother in Christ instead of only a slave, there would have been a new relationship between master and slave that Paul would have liked to see. Philemon would not want to have disappointed the apostle he loved, and certainly would not have wanted him to think he disregarded his intercession for Onesimus. Many lives have been changed when those in the family of God have opened their homes to others and have found a blessing greatly than the inconvenience it might have been. Sons and daughters have met new friends and some have married and started new Christian homes because of hospitality being shown to strangers. Some have "entertained angels unawares" when they have opened their homes and hearts to those who we didn't know when we met.

The prayers of God's people have a special place in the hearts of those who serve the Lord in distant places as well as near at hand. The intercessory work of prayer is a mighty spiritual force in the work going on around the world where the Gospel is being preached. Prayer opens doors that were closed until God intervened and barriers were removed. The interaction of our prayers for each other in the family of God makes the fellowship we share very significant. From many directions to the throne of grace goes the prayers of intercession, thanksgiving, supplication and adoration. From the throne of grace comes answers in that create a unity and fellowship of purpose, grace and love.

Plans and prayer go together as we look ahead to the needs of God's people and to the work to which we have been called. It is appropriate to make plans and set goals that are scriptural and on which we can ask God's blessing. Not always are our plans what God intended so we pray about them and ask that the will of the Lord be done. Sometimes the way is opened that we expected and hoped for because God's answer was "Yes." Other times doors are closed because God's answer is "No" or "Wait awhile." Paul wanted to go back to the churches in the east like Colossae and also to Philippi before going west to Spain, but what we want or plan is always subject to the divine will of God. That is why we pray, and in that way put ourselves in a position to know what God wants.

The fellowship of friends in Christ Jesus is very important. This list of people gives us understanding as to how valuable other people are to us in the work of the Lord. They are all different and all have gifts from God to suit them to the work God gives them to fulfill. These men mentioned were probably all known to Philemon, so they "saluted" him. They were voluntarily confined to Rome, and in the case of Epaphras, to prison, for the sake of Paul and the ministry they could give him. Their names are mentioned as an expression of appreciation for their service.

Epaphras was from Colossae and perhaps was known to Philemon all his life. He would have been a very special person to those in that assembly because it was through him the Gospel was preached there and many of them were saved. Then he would have continued to be with them in the establishing of the testimony into a scripturally gathered church. He would have been grieved at the fact that some of the believers there were paying attention to the false teaching that had come among them. He was doubtless faithful to them when persecution arose and the Jewish teachers and others who mixed asceticism with the doctrine of God, we making headway with some of the saints. It may have been for that reason also he had visited Paul at Rome where he was incarcerated with him in prison. Whatever he told Paul it resulted in apostolic authority being applied when he wrote the epistle to the Colossians that was carried by Tychicus at the same time as the personal letter to Philemon.

There are costs to being associated with the resurrected Christ that we cannot avoid. We should not fear this nor should we seek to avoid that which we know is right both for the people of God and for the furtherance of the Gospel. Epaphras may have been imprisoned for just being associated with Paul but his name is of more value when it comes to eternal things than that of the emperor at the time. Nero was not a nice man and his name is associated with cruelty and hatred while a comparatively unknown man of that day, Epaphras, is associated with grace and peace, forgiveness and reconciliation, and the breaking down of barriers between people.

Mark had been with Barnabas and Paul earlier on in the work of the Lord, but had turned back. For some time, Paul did not want him to be with him in the work, but now he is back with Paul and was "profitable" to him. The Holy Spirit used Mark to write on of the Gospel accounts of the Lord's time here on earth. He probably was an amanuensis for Peter, so was a man capable of putting down carefully that which was told him. He would have been trusted now and his experience in writing may have been especially useful to Paul. Even though a person may fail, he is not necessarily finished for life if he is able and willing to learn from his mistakes and start over again at the beginning. A faithful man is a useful man. The willingness of the apostle Paul to use this man again is an encouragement to us to not ignore one who has failed but has been restored to God. His work may be different from now on but when one has been humbled, he may be more effective in some work than he was before in a different work.

Aristarchus had been traveling with Paul for quite a long time and had been able to work with others from a variety of different backgrounds. He was still with him and was still faithful in his labors with him. He, along with Gaius, had been taken by the rioting crowd when they were in Ephesus. The anger against the Gospel had been directed toward him and others even though he may not have been filling a public speaking role. This "faithful companion" serve God by serving God's servant and was satisfied with that. It is not always easy to keep on doing a work for God without being noticed. But when we know this is where we are supposed to be, and this is what we are supposed to be doing, then that is enough.

Demas was still with Paul, but is a warning to all of us that we may be a help in the work of the Lord and then get turned aside very quickly. None of us are immune from the attractions of the world. Neither are we ever out of reach of temptation. The problem isn't with the world because it is what it is, as we live in it as pilgrims and strangers. Nor is the problem with temptation, because that is always with us. When we start to move toward the world's attractions and when we yield to temptation, that is when we have problems. Sin doesn't seem quite so bad and we become comfortable when we allow ourselves to make excuses for what we know inwardly is wrong.

Luke along with those other men, was a "fellow worker," each one with a God-given gift to use along with their natural talents and acquired abilities. These are to be sanctified for the Master's use and can be a blessing to many others. Luke was likely a man of compassion as most doctors are. When a person has a care and concern for others, there is a wide scope of use for them in the work of the Lord. Luke obviously felt the need of the Lord's people having a good understanding of the life of our Lord as a perfect man when He was here on earth. The Spirit of God used that man to write a clear and masterful account of the years of our Lord on earth beginning from the preparation of John for His coming, to His birth, special accounts of His ministry all the way through to His death, resurrection and ascension. Those unique features of the Gospel of Luke have opened the understanding of many who have come to understand "the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Then later in his written ministry for the Lord, he is used by the Holy Spirit to give the account of the early church in the book of Acts. Much of that concerns the life of Paul which he would have learned first hand from Paul. As a doctor he was able to minister to Paul's physical injuries and his on-going ailment. This would have been greatly appreciated. His compassion was needed and was given. As an educated, practically trained physician he would have been careful in the writing of both Luke and Acts so that the written words would have been true to the facts. He was truly the "beloved physician." Our words leave behind us a picture of who we are. Even the greatest preacher we know of needed the personal care of Luke and appreciated that care. What we really are, whether it is excellence or failure, is revealed when no one is looking or even taking notice of its value.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ working in Philemon was what Paul was relying on to break down the barriers between him and Onesimus, and establish this new relationship that is found in Christ. Now it was on the grounds of faith in Christ that transformed the master-slave relationship into the relationship of two brothers in Christ. Their station in life had not changed but the new birth had changed the men. When that happens friendship can develop between two people that creates the bond of fellowship in Christ no matter

what our calling in life is. Life holds for us no greater blessing than the favor of the Savior being with us constantly.

The book of Philemon begins with grace and peace being prayed for by Paul and now closes with grace that is personal and experienced. Dignity, courtesy and tact are never out of vogue among God's people. They are invaluable in the interaction of saints between each other. Respect and honor one for the other warms the hearts of all and produces the desire to act as graciously as possible for the well-being of each. Warmth and affection are so important to maintain fellowship and joy among the family of God who seek to live for our Lord and please Him. That attitude breaks down barriers between believers and binds us in happy fellowship to each other. It also promotes the work of God in which we are engaged. Being bound together in the bonds of the Gospel and by the truth of God's word gives power to the work of Christians who demonstrate Christian love and grace.

It is like God to give examples of truth so I can understand
The redemptive analogies found in the Bible, but also in every land
There are practices and illustrations so that all men everywhere can see
There is grace sufficient and forgiveness paid for and now is free
To all who grasp the fact that payment is made, "Put that on my account."
Debt settlement has been made by another to remove guilt we could not surmount
So now we can experience not only relief but be assured payment is no longer needed
Because when the truth of grace meeting the debt, we listened, believed on and heeded.

Now, though once a slave to sin and all its diabolical claims
We have been freed from those chains by the power of Jesus' name
Freed to walk in newness of life, free in the new family of faith
This liberty is real, without our additions it is mine by His redeeming grace
The outworking of that can often be seen when together God's people do gather
With a commonality unknown to people around who do not know our heavenly Father
As those who have been freed and in liberty, we don't scatter but unify
Because that freedom has brought blessed slavery that independence cannot supply.

Life is now lived with a reason, and not just for a season as we seek our Master to please
Through each day we live, opportunities are there just waiting for our hands to seize
That we might express in ways that are best when we can't find right words to put down
Yet each day brings us ways to offer our praise to the One who as our Lord we crown
From redeemed hearts and minds, in words we can find at least in a little way to say
"Lord from Thy heart of great grace, let Thy servant here trace some blessings along the
way
That we can give to others, maybe our sisters and brothers, who we can encourage and
relieve a sigh
So that if tonight is the night, when faith gives way to sight, we will rejoice when we are
raised on high."

"I don't know Father, what this day holds. But if there is some lasting value in what I am doing, please use it for Thy glory. And the Lord's people I connect with often are saying they would like to be with Thee in heaven now. So if this is the day of Christ's coming, please keep us from being too surprised. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."