

No One's Slave

Philemon 1:10-16

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A. Freedom (vs. 10-12):

1. I appeal; Exhortation – Paul’s letter taken by Onesimus comes with an earnest plea that he wants Philemon to know is continuously before him. This earnest plea is never going to change for Onesimus.
 - a) Paul did not send Onesimus back to appeal for himself. Paul was willing to speak up for him. He could have told Onesimus upon his release that he was praying for him. Paul said he could order Philemon to do this and if he did, it would be telling him to do what is proper.
 - b) Many people say that they don't agree with the disparity, but how many speak up (Amos 5:3); Paul does.
2. I appeal; Exhortation – This appeal will never change because Philemon is a believer but yet he is a slave owner. He probably has other slaves following the custom of his day as a Roman.
3. Begotten; Born - Paul wants Philemon to know that God's divine nature has been inputted into Onesimus's life because He has accepted Christ into His life. In other words, no matter who Onesimus maybe socially the Lord saved him in the same manner He saved his slave master. There was no distinction (Acts 10:34; Galatians 3:16-29; Ephesians 2:17-21).
 - a) The word “begot” is rare for Paul, especially in a spiritual sense.⁸ He did not use the word “born again” for the new life. Jesus did use the term that way, and he was followed in that usage by John and Peter in particular. Paul’s use of the metaphor simply refers to his part in Onesimus’s conversion. The term “child” in v. 10 shows Paul’s close relationship with Onesimus.^[1]
4. Begotten; Born - Even though Philemon is a true man of God, it took Paul's life and teaching to bring Onesimus to Christ.
 - a) To be “begotten” is a term Christ used because His new life on earth is in total relationship with the Father. Paul uses this term,

rather than “saved” (saved only focuses on the new creation through Christ). It seems like Paul is emphasizing that Onesimus was born out of a genuine relationship with Paul. He grew so close to Paul that out of that relationship he turned his life over to Christ. Now that he is saved, he is valuable to Christ and also to Paul.

b) GOD SAVED ONESIMUS LIKE HE SAVED EVERYONE (ACTS 10:34) BECAUSE IN GOD'S EYES NO ONE IS A SLAVE TO ANYONE BUT HIM (LUKE 17:5-10; WE ARE BOUGHT WITH A PRICE; 1 COR. 6:20; 7:23) NOT EVEN OUR OWN FLESH (ROMANS 6:12-14). WE ARE ALL ONE (GAL. 3:26-29).

5. In my imprisonment - God saw fit to address this issue in the scriptures by allowing Philemon to encounter Paul while he was not only in prison, but also in chains (this is what this word means).
6. In my imprisonment - God allowed a person who once looked down on Gentiles and abused the church for not following Jewish customs to lead not just a Gentile to Christ, but someone who was a slave. This slave is then going to be sent to another Gentile who, though being intimately engaged in church, needed to learn how to love a brother that society said is beneath him. Philemon is in the midst of the church, who I am sure knows he owns slaves, has to love a former slave in the church and in his household (1 John 2:9-10; 4:7-10).
7. Who formally; In the past - Paul admits that Onesimus was not productive as a slave. So, there is reason for Philemon to struggle with his return because he has to first forgive him, then love him, not as a slave but as a fellow brother (along with all the free people in the church) in Christ.
8. Useless both to you and me - Onesimus being a new creation, the Holy Spirit fully in him, made him profitable for the kingdom of God and for Philemon's household. Paul the apostle of God saw the fruit of the Spirit in Onesimus firsthand.
9. Useless both to you and me - Onesimus has been freed from sin so that now he is free servant of the Lord and therefore an asset for the glory of God.
10. I sent him back - The issue between Philemon and Onesimus needs to be addressed, even though he is now a believer and has been growing powerfully. As a result, Paul had Onesimus go back to his master upon his release. They both had to confront the issue of slavery and the issue of not being useful as a slave.
11. Sending my very heart - The point of sending Onesimus back is an expression of Paul's deepest affection for Onesimus and for Philemon.
12. Sending my very heart - Paul wants Philemon to know that the kind of man he had seen Onesimus become, has created such a strong affection for him; that Paul's heart goes

with him.

13. Sending my very heart - Because Onesimus has given and is genuinely saved he is everyone's brother and true servant for the furtherance of the Gospel; so, he is no anyone's slave.

B. Freed to Serve (v. 13):

1. Wishes to keep with me - Because Paul treasures his relationship with Onesimus, even though he sent him, he would deliberately make it his goal to not let him go indefinitely.
2. Wishes to keep with me - When we reflect on how committed Paul was to complete the mission Christ gave him (releasing John Mark for his lack of faithfulness in difficult times), and then think of how he treasured Onesimus's spiritual growth and faithful service, it highlights the kind of work the Lord had done in Onesimus' life. It would such a strong genuine development if Paul wanted to use him rather than send him back.
3. Your behalf he ministers; serve - Paul wanted Philemon to know that this once useless slave has not only grown spiritually but he has also grown in his ability to manage the ministry of serving Paul so that he can accomplish the task the Lord has given him. Onesimus had become a great administrator.
4. Imprisonment for the gospel - Paul was in chains for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. It was during his imprisonment that Onesimus proved to be extremely productive.

C. Accept as a Brother (v. 14):

1. But without your consent; agreement – Even though Paul was thoroughly enjoying Onesimus's faithful productive service, he knows that he and Philemon were not of the same mind since there was an issue that must be addressed.

a) Legally Philemon could have punished Onesimus. Some slave owners were cruel, others, more merciful in these situations. Paul carefully convinced Philemon that he should receive his disobedient slave and forgive him. This situation was quite difficult for Philemon. (The Pauline Letters. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman concise Bible commentary (p. 615). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.)

b) 1) "Welcome him as you would welcome me." (2) "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." Philemon was then able to receive Onesimus as though he were receiving Paul. Paul did not suggest that Philemon ignore the slave's crimes and forget about the debt Onesimus owed. Instead, Paul offered to handle the debt himself. The apostle assured Philemon his debts would be paid. (Dockery, D. S. (1998). The Pauline Letters. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman concise Bible commentary (pp. 615–616). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

2. Did not want to do anything – Paul willfully decided not to do the least thing, absolutely not one thing, that would interfere with the will of Philemon.
3. Goodness – Because Paul now knows how well Onesimus is doing, he infers once Philemon understands this; he would most certainly have a heart to do what pleases God especially since Onesimus' service can be a blessing to others in the church.
4. Goodness – Onesimus' new character would certainly create a benevolent heart in Philemon.
5. Compulsion; Distress – The benevolent heart that Onesimus productive faithful service can create in Philemon, does not need to be created from distress or pressure created by Paul.
6. Free will - Philemon does not need to keep Onesimus because Paul's description and request to receive Onesimus should make Philemon feel no compulsion to respond in this manner.
7. Free will - Knowing that Onesimus is a genuine believer, and a true servant of Christ, should move Philemon, who ("I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints of every good thing that in you for Christ' sake..." vs. 4-7) himself is a sincere believer to accept him, before the church and his household, as a brother in Christ.

D. Equal (vs. 15-16):

1. For a while; very moment – Paul believes that Onesimus's meeting during his imprisonment, being born again and developing into a spiritually productive servant, was all orchestrated by the Lord.
 - a) We can spend so much time looking at the three people in this passage that we forget the person in the background, Christ.

He brought Paul a person with the heart of Onesimus when he was alone in chains for preaching the Gospel. Christ changed the heart of a useless slave to accept Him and then made Onesimus a powerful agent for the Gospel and the master and church he is returning to. This is a time Paul is writing letters a letter that helps us to understand what he thinks of a slave.

2. Back forever – Onesimus’s return does not involve any more escapes because the Lord has changed his heart forever. The past behavior of Onesimus is completely gone. He is truly a new creation.
3. No longer a slave – When Onesimus returns, because the Lord now has full charge of his life, he no longer needs a master. He no longer needs to be treated in the lowest manner a human being could ever experience. He is now more than a person whose only job was to do what a slave master requires.

a) In the eastern part of the Roman Empire during this period, fugitive slaves who sought sanctuary in a household were likely to be given temporary protection by the householder until either a reconciliation with the master had been effected or else the slave had been put up for sale in the market and the resulting price paid to the owner. (Goodenough, *HTR* 22 [1929] 181–83, drew attention to an Athenian law to this effect; it is suggested that this provision survived in Egypt under the Ptolemies and well into Roman imperial times as it influenced Ulpian’s legislation early in the third century A.D.) [\[2\]](#)

4. Beloved brother - Onesimus is now a person who is dear to all the brethren and because of how he has grown with a servant’s heart he would be beloved by those who make up the Christian community; those committed to the purposes of the Lord.

a) Key passages; Ephesians 2:17-22; Gal. 3:26-29; Matt. 25:31-33.

5. Much more to you - Just like Onesimus became and extremely valuable to Paul he would be the same to Philemon.
6. Both in the flesh and in the Lord - Onesimus reunion with Philemon would be beloved both as human beings and as believers who submit their lives to the Lordship of Christ. What seems to be insinuated is, Onesimus would be his friend and his brother, not a slave.

a) Such dual relationships gave rise to difficult problems within the early church. And such problems still complicate the economic and social relations of Christians today (I Tim 6:2;

see on Col 3:11). Pfeiffer, C. F., & Harrison, E. F. (Eds.). (1962).
The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament (Phm 15).
Chicago: Moody Press.

^[1] Melick, R. R. (1991). [Philippians, Colossians, Philemon](#) (Vol. 32, p. 361). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^[2] O'Brien, P. T. (1982). [Colossians, Philemon](#) (Vol. 44, pp. 292–293). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.