

Order of Worship

Announcements

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture

Lord's Supper

Contribution

Sermon

Closing Prayer



Sunday Morning

Bible Classes 9 a.m.

Worship 10 a.m.

Sunday Evening

Worship 5:30 p.m.

Wednesday Evening

Bible Classes 7 p.m.



New York Avenue CHURCH OF CHRIST

July 12, 2026

"... A Debt I Could Not Pay ..."

The little letter of Philemon – only 25 verses long – is tucked away between Titus and Hebrews. It doesn't get a lot of attention. There are no outstanding doctrinal teachings in it. It's a short, personal letter between the apostle Paul and a Christian brother whom the letter is named after – Philemon. Yet it shows the relationship Paul had with others, and in particular Philemon, of course. It also shows how Paul walked the tightrope balancing his apostolic authority with the reality of the situation he was addressing.

The background to the letter is this. Philemon had a bondservant whose name was Onesimus. Onesimus ran away and eventually ended up in Rome. Understand that Paul too was in Rome under house arrest (it was during Paul's first imprisonment), but somehow these two came together. And Paul also discovered – either by discernment or from Onesimus himself – that Onesimus was a runaway. Not only that, Onesimus was a runaway from a man – a brother in Christ – whom Paul knew.

Now, Paul acts according to Deuteronomy 23:15, 16 - 15 "You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. 16 He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him." (ESV) Paul housed Onesimus in his "rented" house in Rome, rather than reporting Onesimus to the authorities or even sending a letter to Philemon telling him to come to Rome and collect Onesimus. Paul taught Onesimus the gospel. And then, Paul sent Onesimus home with this letter in hand, no longer just a bondservant, but a bondservant to Christ.

The letter itself is an humble appeal from one brother to another. On the one hand, Philemon has been wronged by Onesimus. One becomes a bondservant by choice, either to learn a trade or to repay a debt. Instead of fulfilling his obligation, Onesimus ran away. On the other hand, Onesimus has now become a brother in Christ. From Colossians 4:9, Paul describes him as a "faithful and beloved brother." Philemon 1:11, 12 tells us Paul would have kept Onesimus with him there in Rome because Onesimus was "useful" (a play on Onesimus' name, which means "useful" or "beneficial"). However, Paul didn't want to do anything without Philemon's consent and agreement. (1:15) So, Paul can only appeal to Philemon to look at the now returned Onesimus as not just a bondservant, but a brother. There is subtleness here. The final decision as to Onesimus' fate must lie with Philemon. At the same time, Paul is indirectly appealing for mercy. There is also subtleness in the way Paul reminded Philemon of his own "debt" to Paul.

We don't know for sure, but Paul probably was the one who converted Philemon. There is a reference in 1:19 where Paul says, "... to say nothing of your owing me even your own self." (ESV) The point is not that Paul is claiming Philemon owes Paul for his salvation – even though Paul likely taught him the gospel. It's really that Paul is reminding Philemon of what salvation is about: being forgiven for past wrongs. He's really asking Philemon to consider what the Lord forgave him for, and then to apply that kind of mercy and grace to Onesimus' case.

That is also one of the lessons for us from this small letter. Why does the Lord call on us to forgive each other? (See Matthew 6:12-15 as one example.) Isn't it because the Lord first forgave us of our sins? (Another example is the parable in Matthew 18:21-34.) We have all at some point walked in Philemon's shoes having suffered a wrong and then being asked to forgive the wrong doer. It's not always easy, is it? ~ Terry

Daily Bible Reading



"Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

~ 1 Timothy 6:12 NIV