

Fort Washington Baptist Church  
Vacation Bible School 2024  
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## **Vacation Bible School**

June 19-21, 2024



# **A Study on the Epistle to Philemon**

**“Do the Right Thing!”**

## **Session III**

## What are we going to do in this Session?



- Welcome & Greetings
- Opening Prayer
- Purpose & Objectives of Session III
- Review Session II
- Study Outline Points IV-VI
- Answer discussion questions throughout the study

Close in Prayer

## **Purpose & Objectives of Session III**



The purpose of Session III is to review some key points from Session II, work through the Outline points IV-VI, and answer a few discussion questions based on what we glean from the verses we study.

### **Philemon**

**“Do the Right Thing;  
What is proper toward One Another!”**

#### **In Session II:**

- We learned that the Apostle Paul and Timothy reached out to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the congregation that met in Philemon’s house. While Paul wrote the letter, Timothy is mentioned as an author, perhaps because he offered godly counsel to Paul on the contents and tone of the letter.

**Learning Point:** When addressing sensitive issues with others, as Paul did with Philemon, having someone faithful and true in one’s life, like a Timothy, can help you to do the right thing.

- We learned that neither Philemon nor the members of his congregation knew the right thing to do toward Onesimus, who ran away and had now returned, until they received Paul’s counsel in the letter. They would have done what was legal, what was lawful, what the law allowed them to do to a runaway slave who returned, rather than what was lawful. They did not know that in Christ there is another way to treat people...a right way...a proper way...a loving way...where

people are not given what they deserve for the wrongs they committed...they're given what they need!

**Learning Point:** When you become aware that someone loved is dealing with a difficult issue, if able, with love and concern, offer counsel on the right thing do.

- **We learned that Paul encouraged Philemon** and more than likely that entire congregation. When Philemon received the letter from Onesimus, he probably read it first and then read it in the hearing of the whole congregation so they would understand what the right thing to do concerning Onesimus. **Paul informed Philemon** that he was praying for him. **He let him know** he gave God thanks for him. **He told him** that he had comfort and joy hearing about Philemon's love and faith. **He told him** that the hearts of the saints were refreshed through him.

Philemon was over the church in his house. He was the Pastor there. Apphia and Archippus could have been ministers or deacons. They were leaders, with Philemon, over the congregation. Philemon had been effective in his ministry – making a difference in the hearts and lives of those saints - refreshing their hearts through the good that was within him for Christ's sake. Paul wanted this man of love and faith to demonstrate love and faith toward him and Onesimus. This situation with Onesimus **would reveal** what was in Philemon's heart for the sake of Christ.

**Learning Point:** Situations reveal what's within us, what's within our hearts, whether we have love or faith or compassion or kindness or mercy or gentleness or patience or understanding or none of these things within us. Allow situations in your life to reveal Christlikeness in your heart. This situation revealed what was in Paul's heart for Onesimus and Philemon and would reveal what was in Philemon's heart. **Do the right thing! Pray for one another, encourage one another, and refresh one another's heart.**

- Paul appealed to Philemon to do the right thing toward Onesimus, who was not the same man who had fled from Philemon. Onesimus wasn't Paul's son when he fled from Philemon...but now he was. Onesimus had not been useful to Paul before he fled, but now he was. Onesimus had not been useful to Philemon before he fled, but now, in Christ he would be useful. Onesimus was not Philemon's brother when he fled, but now in Christ, Onesimus was Philemon's slave and his brother. The man returning to Philemon was a different man from the one who fled from Philemon. Would Philemon treat Onesimus differently or would he treat him as though Onesimus had not changed or would Philemon behave partially – loving others but showing no love to Onesimus?

### **Learning Points:**

- **Christ changes lives.** People can change and do change when Christ becomes real in their life. Onesimus changed when he came to Christ.
- **Christ changes how we are perceived by others.** Onesimus was formerly useless to Philemon but through Christ, he would become useful to both Paul and Philemon (11). He did not add to Philemon's life before Christ...but now in Christ, Onesimus would add to Philemon's life. The name Onesimus means "profitable" (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon). Before Christ, Onesimus' life was of no profit to Philemon...even though he had been Philemon's slave. However, now in Christ, the one who was "unprofitable," was now "profitable," now useful to Paul, Philemon, and truthfully to the congregation that met at Philemon's house.
- **Christ changes relationships.** Onesimus wasn't Philemon's brother when he fled, but in Christ, he was Philemon's brother.
- **Christ changes how we treat one another.** Instead of treating Onesimus like a runaway slave, Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus like a returning brother. Christ changes what we view to be the right thing to do concerning someone who has committed a wrong against us.

**For Discussion:**

- Name someone whose life has changed because of coming to Christ.
- Name someone that you've changed your perception of because they've come to Christ.
- What relationships have changed in your life because of Christ in your life.
- Name someone who changed how they treat you because of their relationship with Christ.
- Name someone that you've changed how you treat him/her because of your relationship with Christ.

## **Exegesis of Philemon**

**I. Do the right thing! Honor what is good towards one another (12-14).**

- a. **Paul honored what was good, what was right toward Philemon by sending Onesimus back to Philemon, whom he wanted to keep with him (12-13).**
- b. **Paul honored what was good, what was right toward Philemon by allowing him to respond with goodness of his own free will and not compulsion (14)**

I have            sent him back  
                          to you in person,  
that is,  
                          *sending* my very heart (12),  
                          whom I wanted to keep with me,  
                          so that  
                          in your behalf  
                          he might be at my service

in my imprisonment for the gospel  
(13);

The Apostle Paul was Jewish (Phi. 3:5). He was a Pharisee, a teacher of the Law of Moses recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In the Law of Moses, God gave Israel clear instruction on what to do if a slave escapes to you,

*“You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him”* (Deu. 23:15-16).

The context of these verses pertained to slaves of one’s enemies. Since Israel did not have a relationship with their enemies, since their enemies were also enemies of God, God did not require Israel to extend themselves towards their enemies **unless** their enemies came to Israel seeking protection. The context is, if foreign slaves, escape their foreign masters, who are enemies Israel, Israel is not obligated to show kindness to the Master, but rather to the slave who has escaped to Israel seeking shelter and protection. In this case, Israel was commanded to allow that runaway slave to sojourn in one of the towns of Israel. That slave, even while being a foreigner, was not to be mistreated.

Onesimus fled from Philemon. Remember that Philemon had been converted by the Apostle Paul (19). Since Onesimus was Philemon’s slave, more than likely, Onesimus encountered Paul when Paul led Philemon to Christ. Onesimus knew of Paul. The church at Philemon’s house, all those believers, the community the church was, all knew of the Apostle Paul. Where did Philemon live? What community did he live in?

Paul does not mention where Philemon lived in his letter to Philemon. However, readers can draw a conclusion as to where Philemon lived. This matters. Paul writes the letter to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus (1). In Colossians Paul wrote,

“And say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it” (4:17).

Archippus was with Philemon. Archippus was in Colossae which means Philemon's house and church were also in Colossae. Further evidence of this fact is concerning Onesimus. Paul wrote this:

"For I have sent him (Tychicus) to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is **one of your number**. They will inform you about the whole situation here" (Col. 4:8-9).

Onesimus was from Colossae. Paul wrote, "he is one of your number." When Onesimus fled from Philemon, he fled from Colossae all the way Rome, where he encounters Paul, who was in a Roman prison in rented quarters (Acts 28:30-31). Rome is 1,359 miles from Colossae.



When Onesimus gets to Rome, he meets Paul, who he knew led Philemon to Christ. Paul was in prison. Paul leads Onesimus to Christ and then Onesimus avails himself to minister to the Apostle Paul. Onesimus became very dear to Paul...his very heart walking around outside of his body. Because Onesimus was a slave of Philemon Paul argues that whatever Onesimus would do to him, it would be on behalf of Philemon. In essence, Paul explains that all that Onesimus would do to bless him, would be on behalf of Philemon --- this is Paul's argument. Paul explains to

Philemon, this one who belongs to you to serve you – is serving me on your behalf – it's as though you're rendering service to me in my imprisonment. Everything Onesimus does is in your behalf...this is good! Paul explains...

I have            sent him back  
                          to you in person,  
that is,  
                          sending my very heart (12),  
whom I wanted to keep with me,  
                          so that  
                          **in your behalf**  
                          he might be at my service  
                          in my imprisonment for the gospel  
                          (13);

Reading this, how could Philemon not feel Onesimus should have stayed with Paul...after all, everything he does for Paul, he does on my behalf. Paul allowed Onesimus to reside with him in his rented quarters, which would have been in accordance with Jewish Law. However, rather than keeping Onesimus, he sends Onesimus back, because Onesimus did not flee an enemy of Paul to come to him. Onesimus fled Philemon, someone whom Paul loved. Therefore, Paul could not treat Philemon like an enemy and keep Onesimus without Philemon's consent. Paul honored what was good toward Philemon. However, there was a much graver issue at play.

Colossae was a Roman city. Slavery at this time was inhumane. In his article, *Resisting Slavery in Ancient Rome*, Professor Keith Bradley wrote,

“In Rome and Italy, in the four centuries between 200 BC and 200 AD, perhaps a quarter or even a third of the population was made up of slaves. Over time millions of men, women, and children lived their lives in a state of legal and social non-existence with no rights of any kind. They were non-persons - notice that in Plutarch's story the slave does not even have a name - and they couldn't own anything, marry, or have legitimate families.

Their role was to provide labour, or to add to their owners' social standing as visible symbols of wealth, or both. Some slaves were treated well, but there were few restraints on their owners' powers, and physical punishment and sexual abuse were common. Owners thought of their slaves as enemies. By definition slavery was a brutal, violent and dehumanising institution, where slaves were seen as akin to animals.”<sup>1</sup>

Regarding runaway slaves, Professor Bradley wrote,

“Running away was less dangerous than rebellion, but it was still a hazardous enterprise. Slave-catchers apart, Roman law forbade the harbouring of fugitives, so slaves on the run were always in danger and **if caught could be savagely punished**. To many therefore it must have made sense not to risk life and limb by running away, but to carry out acts of willful obstruction or sabotage that harmed slave-owners' interests at minimal risk to themselves.

Slaves, for example, might steal food or other supplies from the household. Those in positions of responsibility might falsify record books, and embezzle money from their owners, or arrange for their own manumission (setting free). Ordinary farm labourers might deliberately go slow on the job, or injure the animals they worked with to avoid work - or they might pretend to be ill, destroy equipment, or damage buildings. If your job was to make wine and you had to produce a certain quota, why not add in some sea-water to help things along? Almost any slave could play truant or simply waste time.

All these petty forms of day-to-day resistance appealed to Roman slaves. They allowed slaves to frustrate and annoy their owners, and offered the satisfaction of knowing that their owners' powers were not absolute - that even the most humble of human beings could take action to empower themselves.

Owners complained that their slaves were lazy and troublesome - instead of working they were always pilfering food or clothing or valuables (even the silverware), setting fire to property (villas included), or wandering around the city's art galleries and public entertainments.”<sup>2</sup>

**Point:** Paul was Jewish and a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25), well acquainted with what could be done to a runaway slave. He knew about slave catchers and knew that slaves, who were caught, could be severely punished, even killed. John Rutherford

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<sup>1</sup> [BBC - History - Ancient History in depth: Resisting Slavery in Ancient Rome](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

wrote, “In the Roman Empire slaves were constantly crucified for smaller offenses than those of which Onesimus had been guilty. A thief and a runaway had nothing but torture or death to expect.”<sup>3</sup> Paul knew this.

Paul also knew that slaves who did not runaway did all they could to frustrate their masters...they were intentionally “useless and unprofitable.” Sending Onesimus back took faith - that Philemon would not do what was legal according to Roman Law to Onesimus, but would do what was loving, according to God’s law of love. Paul believed that the testimonies about Philemon were true – that saints were being refreshed by his love and faith – and wanted Philemon to demonstrate this love and faith toward Onesimus. Paul explained that formerly Onesimus was “useless” but not he was “useful,” “profitable” as his name suggests. He would no longer “deliberately go slow on the job.” He was a new man, who had proven to be useful to Paul and would be the same toward Philemon.

**Thinking thoughtfully:** Can you imagine, when Onesimus fled, because it was common for slaves to steal, he may have stolen things of value from Philemon, not fleeing empty handed. Philemon, would have talked about Onesimus’ fleeing with Apphia, Archippus, all the members of the congregation at his house, and many others in Colossae. They all knew Onesimus and perhaps had formed an opinion about this runaway slave, who did not work when he was with Philemon, and fled with goods belonging to Philemon. The things they might have said about Onesimus can surely be imagined. Now can you imagine how they felt when they saw Onesimus coming with Tychicus, with a letter from Paul, who discipled the Colossians and Paul writing concerning Onesimus, “**our faithful and beloved brother who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here (in Rome)**” (Col. 4:9). They have must said to themselves, “Who is this? When did you get converted? When did you give your life to Christ? When did you become faithful? How did you end up spending time with the Apostle Paul? How did you become his son? When did you become so useful...so productive that even Paul said you ministered to him?”

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<sup>3</sup> International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume III, page 2194 “Onesimus.”

Philemon must have stared at Onesimus in amazement, in disbelief, in awe of the power of God and the power of the Gospel to change a life. How could he ask Onesimus to return anything? How could he severely punish him? He must have wanted to talk about Onesimus' conversion experience and the days he spent with the Apostle Paul. Letters sent to the Churches were to be read in the hearing of all (Col. 4:15-18). When Philemon read what Paul wrote, his head and heart must have bowed with humility. Paul writes,

I have        sent him back  
                    to you in person,  
that is,  
                    *sending my very heart (12),*  
whom I wanted to keep with me,  
so that  
                    **in your behalf**  
                    he might be at my service  
                    in my imprisonment for the gospel  
                    (13);  
but I did not want to do anything  
                    without your consent,  
so that  
                    your goodness  
                    would not be, in effect,  
                    by compulsion,  
but      of your own free will (14).

The whole congregation hearing this, must have put their arms around their brother, thanking Paul for leading Onesimus to Christ. Philemon must have given the Lord thank for Paul who gave him the opportunity to respond with goodness toward Onesimus, not from compulsion but from love and of his own free will.

**Lesson Point:** This was a once in a life-time opportunity of Philemon to show love to Onesimus, a returning runaway slave, to not do what was legal and lawful but what was loving, an opportunity to show the whole congregation and the community

in Colossae – that this is what Christians do when a wrong has committed and a brother returns for reconciliation.

**Your thoughts:** Some opportunities to show love to some people only happen once but the impact of that display of love touches the hearts of more people than you can ever imagine.

**II. Do the right thing! Let each one benefit from your relationship with the Lord (15-20).**

**a. Paul reasoned that he and Philemon would benefit from Onesimus, who was now a brother in the Lord (15-16).**

For perhaps *it was* for this reason

*that he was separated from you for a while,  
that you would have him back forever (15),  
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 (16).*

**Point:**

Paul attributed Onesimus' separation from Philemon to divine intervention. What happened was not a coincidence...it was providence. God interceded in both of their lives, in the lives of the congregants, and in the lives of that community to show everyone what happens when people come to Christ. People change from being useless to useful. Relationships change – you become family in Christ. They were brothers now and had one another forever. Nothing would separate them again.

Philemon had a relationship with Onesimus in the flesh – as his slave – and in the Lord – as his brother. Paul believed that separation was for Onesimus' conversion, his regeneration (he was born again), his adoption into the family of

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God, his restoration with Philemon, their reconciliation with one another, and Philemon's personal demonstration of the love of God and Christ towards a brother in Christ.

Paul believed that God needed someone to be an example in Colossae of what happens when people come to Christ – an example that could be referenced for all-time – that in Christ there is restoration of relationships, reconciliation with others, mercy (*sparing people punishment they deserve*) and love (*doing for others what they need*), grace (*giving others what they don't deserve*) and faith (*knowledge that you are in God's will*), goodness and kindness.

Paul opened Philemon's eyes to see that God chose him for this experience so Onesimus could return and be a blessing to him and everyone would see what it means to be in Christ. Philemon would now benefit from having Onesimus back and Onesimus would benefit from his new relationship with Philemon in Christ. The church and the community would benefit from seeing Christianity in action.

Paul called Philemon a beloved brother (1) and now tells Philemon that Onesimus is his beloved brother (16). Paul suggests that everything Philemon is to him, Onesimus would be to Philemon – a dearly loved brother – forever!

**b. Paul asked Philemon to accept Onesimus as he would accept Paul, charging anything that Onesimus owed to Paul's account (17-18).**

If then        you regard me  
                  as a partner,  
accept him  
                  as *you would me* (17).

But if        he has wronged you  
                  in any way  
or            owes *you anything*,  
                  charge that to my account (18);

**Point:**

What did Philemon think of Paul? How did he regard him? How did he feel about him? When he looked at Paul, how did Philemon view him? What adjectives did Philemon use when telling others about his relationship with Paul? Paul believed they were partners, intimate associates, companions, with high regard for one another...a relationship of deep trust...a caring relationship. Paul tells Philemon that if he regarded the way that Paul regarded Philemon, then to treat Onesimus as he would Paul. Paul had already shared that Onesimus represented Philemon as he ministered to Paul...now Paul tells Philemon, Onesimus is to be viewed as you view me. Paul would be informed about how Philemon viewed their relationship by how he treated Onesimus.

Paul was not naïve to think that Onesimus did not cause Philemon to suffer some loss of wealth...perhaps he stole something when he fled. Maybe, before he fled, he worked slowly, costing Philemon money. Paul assured Philemon that he was aware that monies could have been lost and debts could have been incurred. Therefore, Paul tells Philemon, "Charge it to my account." It's like our relationship Christ. We're indebted to God...Jesus shows up and speaks to God on our behalf and says, "Whatever debts they've incurred, I'll pay it! Charge the debt to my account and drop the charges against them. Set them free from owing anything. Allow them to return home. Give them access to everything that comes with home. Hold nothing against them. Deny them nothing because of their debts. I'll pay whatever they owe. Charge it all to My account."

Philemon must have realized that what Paul wanted him to do with Onesimus, Christ had done for him. Onesimus did not have the means to pay what he owed...so Paul said, "charge it to my account."

**Points:** Paul was willing to carry the debts of Onesimus so that Onesimus could be free of debt. He was willing pay whatever Onesimus owed, if that's what Philemon wanted...just don't hold Onesimus accountable for anything. Allow Onesimus to be free from debt!

- c. **Paul assured Philemon that he wrote the letter, would repay anything owed, and reminded Philemon that he also owed Paul (19).**

I, Paul, have written *this*  
with my own hand,  
I will repay *it* (not to mention to you  
that you owe to me  
even your own self as well) (19).

**Point:**

This letter was like a promissory note – a signed blank check, where Paul is saying “whatever my son Onesimus has incurred in regard to you, here’s my signed blank check. Give me the amount. I’ll pay it.” Paul also reminds Philemon of what he owes...not to go tit-for-tat...but so Philemon would realize that like Onesimus, he is also in debt. What could Philemon do to pay toward his debt with Paul...hold nothing against Onesimus. However, if Philemon desired the debt to be paid, Paul would pay it. Paul gives Philemon something to think about. Before he decides to be too exact with Onesimus’ debt, Paul has Philemon consider his own debt...that he owes Paul more than money...he owes his very life to the ministry of the Apostle Paul. What could he pay Paul for the Gospel he preached that caused Philemon to believe and be saved?

**Point:** What value do you place on the life of the one who led you to faith in Christ? Have you ever considered that you owe them your very life...for through them God saved you?

**d. Paul asked Philemon to refresh his heart in Christ (20).**

Yes, brother, let me benefit  
from you in the Lord;  
refresh my heart in Christ (20).

The verb translated benefit is understood to mean “to be useful, to profit, to help, to cause someone to have joy” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon (3685)). Paul writes, “Yes, brother, let me benefit (be useful to me, help me, let me profit, cause me to have joy) from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ, just like you

refreshed the hearts of other saints (7); let my heart rest, let my heart be at peace, let my heart not worry about any hurt or harm coming upon my son Onesimus. Set him free from any debt he owes you, charge it to me and treat him like a beloved brother.

**Point:** Are you affected by how believers treat other believers? If you were to see one believer can't cancel the debt of another believer...can't forgive another believer, how would that affect you? And if you were to see a believer cancel the debt of a believer who caused them a loss how would that affect you? It affected Paul. He wanted his heart to be refreshed. It could only be refreshed if the debt was canceled.

III. **Do the right thing! Be obedient when others ask you to do what is proper, what is right toward others (21-25).**

- a. Paul was confident that Philemon would do what is right by obeying his requests toward Philemon and getting a room ready for his arrival (21-22).
- b. Paul shared greeting to Philemon from the brothers in Christ who were with Paul (23-24).

## Having confidence

**in your obedience**, I write to you,  
since I know **that you will do**  
even more than what I say (21).

At the same time also  
prepare me a guest room,  
for I hope  
that through your prayers  
I will be given to you (22).

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner  
in Christ Jesus, greets you (23),

*as do* Mark,

## Aristarchus,

Demas,

and Luke, my fellow workers (24).

## The grace

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of the Lord Jesus Christ be with  
your spirit (**25**).