

Philemon 1:18-25 – Confident of Obedience

In verses 8-17, Paul was mediating between Philemon and his slave Onesimus. Paul only had good things to say about both Philemon and Onesimus. Paul recognized that Onesimus was Philemon's slave and he did not want to command Philemon but instead urged him as a beloved brother. The only clear request that Paul made of Philemon in the first 17 verses was that he receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul.

Read Philemon 1:18-20.

What kind of slave do you think Onesimus was? Do you think he was a temporary slave who was working for Philemon until he paid off a debt? Do you think he was working for Philemon as an apprentice? Do you think he was a permanent slave who was "owned" by Philemon? Based on verse 18, do you think that Onesimus took money from Philemon? If so, did he directly steal money from him or was the loss of money due to lost work that Onesimus would have done? If this was the case and Onesimus was a servant working off a debt, this would have normally extended his time working for Philemon. (1:18)

Instead of Onesimus working off any debt, what did Paul tell Philemon to do about the debt? Do you think that this statement hinted that Paul wanted Philemon to free Onesimus? Explain your answer. (1:18)

In verse 19, Paul said that he was writing with his own hand. Paul also made a similar statement at the end of 1 Corinthians, Galatians, 2 Thessalonians and Colossians. Paul's handwriting was one way that people knew that the letter really was from Paul. In this letter, Paul's own handwriting may have served an added purpose. In his own handwriting, what did Paul promise to do? (1:19)

The end of verse 19 may sound familiar to anyone who had a mother who liked to use guilt to motivate. "Would you go to the store for your poor old mother? I won't even mention all the things I have done for you including giving you life itself". Most interpret the end of verse 19 to mean that Philemon owed his spiritual life to Paul because Philemon was converted under the preaching of Paul, or one of Paul's fellow workers. Paul basically said that Philemon owed Paul a debt and the debt that he owed to Paul was himself. What did that mean? Was this only true of the original apostles? Most commentators seem comfortable with the idea that if a church leader shares the gospel with someone and they come to Christ, that the person now owes the church leader themselves. But, the person owes their life to God. How do they also owe their life to the one who shared the Gospel with them? That sounds odd to me. I would not say "you owe me yourself" to another believer. I would always want to put the focus on the person's unpayable debt to Christ and not any debt to me. They are Christ's slave. They are not my slave. (1:19)

In verse 7, Paul mentioned how Philemon refreshed the hearts of the saints. What did Paul expect Philemon to do for him? What do you think the benefit involved? (1:20)

Read Philemon 1:21-25.

In verse 21, what was Paul confident about? In verses 8-9, Paul said that he did not want to command Philemon but would rather appeal to him out of love. Does obedience fit more with a command or with a request? In the second half of the verse, Paul said that he knew that Philemon would do more than what he "said". "Saying" covers both commands and requests. Did Paul ask anything of Philemon beyond welcoming Onesimus and charging any debts to Paul? (1:21)

In verse 22, Paul asked for something that did not involve Onesimus. What did Paul ask Philemon to do? In the second half of the verse, what was Paul's hope? Does this hope influence your thinking on where the letter was written? Some people think that Paul wanted Philemon to send Onesimus back to him. That interpretation does not make sense if Paul truly hoped to come to Colossae soon. "Your prayers" and "to you" both contain the plural form of "you". (1:22)

In verse 23, who sent their greetings to Philemon. "You" is singular in verse 23. Who was Epaphras? See Colossians 1:7-8 and 4:12-13.

What fellow workers of Paul were mentioned in verse 24? All these people, along with Onesimus, were also mentioned in Colossians 4:7-14. In verse 23, Paul called Epaphras his fellow prisoner. In Colossians 4:10, Paul called Aristarchus his fellow prisoner. What do we know about these fellow workers?

Paul ended the letter with his standard greeting. "Your" is plural while "spirit" is singular. Why do you think Paul liked to close his letters with "grace... be with you"?

What did you learn from Philemon?