

Forgiveness and Acceptance

Very little is preached or written about the letter that Paul wrote to his **“dear friend and fellow worker”** Philemon. **(verse 1)** He hosted the church in his house, perhaps in Colossae. **(verse 2)** His love for and his faith in Christ were well known. It has **“refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.”** **(verse 7)** But, he was also a slave owner. And his slave, Onesimus, has run away and made his way to Rome, where Paul is imprisoned.

It is Onesimus, not necessarily Philemon, who is at the center of the letter. Paul is writing to Philemon, telling him that he is going to return Onesimus to him. Onesimus is a Christian, Paul’s **“son”** while Paul was **“in chains.”** He was, as Paul put it, **“my very heart.”** Onesimus is useful to Paul, serving him while he was in prison. He has taken the word of God as taught to him by Paul and is living it out in his servitude to this old, imprisoned preacher.

Paul would like to keep him, but he knows he cannot. At least not without Philemon’s permission. But it is obvious that Paul would gladly accept Onesimus back as a gift from Philemon. However, he knows that Philemon may keep Onesimus: **“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever”-- “He is very dear to me but even dearer to you.”** **(verses 15 and 16)**

But Onesimus’ return to Philemon would mark a change in their relationship. Onesimus was no longer just a slave to Philemon, he was a **“fellow man”** and a **“dear brother.”** **(verse 16)** This is the point in the letter that Paul does what he does best—using what he knows about the situation to bring about the desired result. He could **“order”** Philemon **“to do what he ought to do”** but instead appeals to him **“on the basis of love.”** **(verse 8)**

Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, not a slave. He wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus back **“as you would welcome me.”** **(verse 17)** I know you’re a good man, Philemon, who will do the right thing. Do this for me, **“if you consider me a partner.”** **(verse 17)** And, by the way, did I mention that **“you owe me your very self?”** **(verse 19)** I know you will do **“even more than I ask.”** **(verse 21)** I have that much confidence in you. This will allow me to **“have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.”** **(verse 20)** Onesimus had been serving me—doing what you couldn’t do. Now, YOU serve me by doing as I ask.

Forgiveness and acceptance after a wrong has been done to one person by another is central to Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, and helps us to see and understand how God accepts us and forgives us when we wrong Him. We are to handle the situation in the way Jesus told us to and Paul repeats in this letter to Philemon. Children of God follow the example of their Father.

No one really knows how the story turns out. I do feel, however, that Philemon received Onesimus back as a brother. He served Philemon as Paul instructed slaves to serve their masters in Ephesians 6 and Colossians 3. Philemon treated Onesimus fairly, as Paul’s

instructions for masters instructed him. And both of them served the Lord as equals -- co-slaves of Jesus Christ. Paul believed it would turn out that way. Who am I to disagree?

---Johnny Stephens