

## Philemon (part 2)

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This is the second part of series of articles on the New Testament epistle to Philemon. Please see last week's article for comments on verses 1-7.

***“Therefore, though I have enough conscience in Christ to order you to do that which is proper, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you – since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now a prisoner of Christ Jesus – I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me” (Philemon 8-11).***

Apparently, Onesimus was a runaway slave who had caused some damage to Philemon's estate (Philemon 16,18). Of note is the fact that there was little leniency in Roman culture for runaway slaves (crucifixion was a typical punishment). The loss of both capital and production would have been felt by the slave-owner. While in Rome, Paul and Onesimus met and the fugitive was converted, reforming his ways so thoroughly that he had become an almost-indispensable resource to the apostle. But true conversion requires the reformation of our ways, as well as the “owning up” of our wrongs. This is the true nature of the letter; an earnest appeal to a wronged master (who has every legal right to terminate Onesimus' life) for leniency and forgiveness.

- It is interesting to note who is involved here. What could easily become a church-splitting drama is kept tidy through swift and honest action. Paul will not give the church in Colossae a chance to form opinions and takes sides over what to do with Onesimus. It is Philemon's prerogative, and only Apphia (possibly Philemon's wife) and Archippus (who may either be a preacher or deacon in Colossae, according to Colossians 4:17) are specifically mentioned as being involved. The “*church in your house*” is mentioned, but only because of the very public (and illegal) nature of Onesimus' indiscretion.

### Relationship

Paul notes that he could “order” Philemon to forgive Onesimus. He could quote Matthew 6:14-15 and the discussion would be over. It would be totally destructive to the work of the church in Colossae to bring legal action against a fellow Christian (1 Corinthians 6:1ff). Yet it is not *forced* compliance that Paul wants. It is an appeal to Philemon's conscience, his faith, and his capacity to love even someone who has harmed him. Paul is banking on his relationship with Philemon. If their friendship had not been so strong, perhaps such a request would have been a waste of time. Have we developed such close relationships with other Christians? Could we go to our brothers and sisters for anything, or ask of them the seemingly impossible?

### Useless

***“Useless”*** is a word that jumps out at me. Notice that Paul never blames Philemon for causing this man to run away. He was a good master, who conducted every part of his life in faith. It was, rather, Onesimus (whose name means “profitable”) who was not living up to his potential. Paul does not downplay the fact of the matter: that Onesimus had been a “useless” individual. There was nothing good to say about his former life before conversion. There was no defense or excuse. But Christianity takes the formless, useless, listless person and gives him or her purpose (Colossians 3:5-11, Romans 12:2).