

## Philemon (part 3)

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This is the third and final article in a series on the New Testament epistle to Philemon.

***“And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will” (Philemon 12-14).***

It was up to Philemon what he would do with Onesimus; forgive him or destroy him, willingly or by compulsion.

- *“Sending my very heart...”* Paul makes no attempt to hide the personal loss he would feel if Onesimus were permanently taken from him. He takes a great risk by sending him “in person”, instead of sending an apology note. But we all must keep ourselves from illegal situations, no matter how “right” the matter seems from our perspective. Paul himself would have been a criminal for continuing to knowingly associate with a man who had evaded legal troubles. As for Onesimus, he never would have been right in avoiding responsibility for his situation. His “fresh start” required that he go full circle and return to face his mistakes.
- By emphasizing the positive effects forgiveness would have on everybody, Paul is appealing to the compassionate, caring side of Philemon. It might have been tempting to disregard the plea for the sake of Onesimus only, but to see how everybody profits (not only Onesimus, but Paul, Timothy, the Christians in Rome and Colossae, etc.) makes the appeal that much harder to resist – to say nothing of the spiritual satisfaction Philemon would find in expressing sincere forgiveness and compassion.
- *“That your goodness should not be by compulsion”* is a beautiful and clever expression. Is true goodness ever by compulsion?

***“For perhaps he was for this reason removed from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, 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” (Philemon 15-16).***

- *“Perhaps”* is a great point to remember, since we never really know how God’s providence is working in our lives. Some things are just “time and chance” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Our circumstances should never be about whether or not it is God “pulling strings”, but what our responsibility is with the situations presented to us.
- *“That you should have him back forever...”* Another poetic line from the apostle! If Philemon drags Onesimus home and punishes him, all he has done is restore a slave to his possession. If he accepts him as a Christian and extends the warmth

of fellowship, he has gained an eternal brother. Perhaps the economic structure continued to exist in their relationship (it was no sin to share a slave/master relationship, after all [Titus 3:9-10, 1 Timothy 6:1-2]), but their mutual faith opened their eyes to the fact that money, position, status, or title mean nothing in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28). Being a fellow Christian surpasses all other qualities, whether they be differences or similarities.

***“If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ” (Philemon 17-20).***

Paul must have shared quite a special bond with each of these men. Onesimus had become so useful to the apostle that he was willing to stick out his neck and risk his reputation on him. Philemon was so valuable to Paul that even the thought of a situation that aroused bitterness in his heart was unthinkable. In the end, no matter what we do to each other, we must learn to forgive and move on, as God has done for all of us. If we are unwilling to give to others the same grace that has been given to us, we no longer walk in a manner that is worthy of such vast and immeasurable love (Matthew 6:15).