



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Paul's Appeal for Onesimus

Philemon 8–16

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Introduction

1. Paul connects the themes he introduced in his greeting¹ to the appeal he makes to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus (note the inferential conjunction διό [*dio*], “therefore, for this reason” in v. 8).²
2. The text consists of five short sections (cf. Wright 1986, 179).

An Appeal, Not a Command (vv. 8–9)

3. Paul did not exercise his right to command Philemon to do what was right (v. 8).
 - a. “Command” (ἐπιτάσσω, *epitassō*) – “to command with authority, *order*” (BDAG 2000, 383).
 - b. “Do what is right” (ἀνέκω, *anēkō*) – “*be suitable, be proper*” (Danker 2009, 32).
4. Rather, he made an “appeal” (v. 9).
 - a. “Appeal” is παρακαλῶ (*parakalō*), Paul’s standard word for entreaty, imploring, urging, etc. (cf. Rom 12.1; 1 Cor 1.10; 4.13; 2 Cor 10.1; Eph 4.1; etc.; the word appears twice in Phlm 9–10).
 - b. He appeals “on the basis of love” (διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην, *dia tēn agapēn*), not duty (Wright 1986, 180).
 - c. To reinforce it, he mentions two personal traits.
 - 1) He is an “elderly man” (πρεσβύτες, *presbytēs*); respect for age was important in his culture, as well as in Judaism (cf. Lev 19.32; Sirach 8.6) (Keener 2014, 635; Fitzmeyer 2000, 106).³
 - 2) He is also a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” (cf. v. 1).

For Onesimus, Paul's Son Fathered in Chains (v. 10)

5. His appeal is for his “son, Onesimus,” whose “father [he] became while [he] was in chains.”⁴
 - a. *Parakalō* is repeated, adding urgency to the appeal.
 - b. Paul uses the language of the rabbis regarding their disciples (Wright 1986, 181; Keener 2014, 635).
 - c. He also introduces “Onesimus.”
 - 1) “The name ‘Onesimus’ literally means ‘useful’, deriving from the same root as the phrase ‘have some benefit’ in verse 20” (Wright 1986, 181). (“Onesimus” is Ονήσιμος, *Onēsimos*; “Benefit” is ὀνίνημι, *oninēmi*.)
 - 2) It was a common slave’s name—for obvious reasons—that likely originated as a nickname (Wright 1986, 181; Keener 2014, 635).
 - 3) In the Greek text, it is the last word in the sentence which, literally translated, is “I appeal to you concerning my son, the one born in the chains, Onesimus.”

- a) “Paul delays the naming of Onesimus to this verse, and indeed to the very end of the sentence, so that he names him only after he has shown that the slave is now a Christian; thus he renders Philemon more favorably disposed to his ‘child.’ Philemon has probably heard little about Onesimus since he departed, until he reads this sentence” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 106).

From Useless to Useful (vv. 11–12)

6. Verse 11 uses a wordplay to reveal the change that had occurred in Onesimus: from useless to useful.
 - a. Though evident in English, the wordplay is even closer in the Greek (Wright 1986, 182).
 - 1) “Useless” – ἄχρηστος, *achrēstos*; “to not serving any beneficial purpose” (BDAG 2000, 160).
 - 2) “Useful” – εὐχρηστος, *euchrēstos*; an emphatic compound word: “really useful” (Wright 1986, 182).
 - b. Why had Onesimus (“useful”) become useless? Paul gives no details, content to play on the meaning of the slave’s name (Fitzmeyer 2000, 108).
7. He is more emphatic that Onesimus has become his “very heart” (σπλάγχχνον, *splanchnon*; v. 12; cf. vv. 7, 20). “The word ... ties together the three movements of the letter” (Wright 1986, 183).
8. “Paul sees Onesimus as part of himself” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 109), but is “sending him back to you” (v. 12).

Paul’s Desire and Deference (vv. 13–14)

9. Verse 13 intensifies verse 12: Paul’s desire (βούλομαι, *boulomai*) is to keep Onesimus with him for assistance in his imprisoned ministry for the gospel; he would thus serve in Philemon’s stead.
 - a. Paul takes two points for granted here:
 - 1) Philemon would have wanted to help Paul while in prison; other duties made that impossible.
 - 2) Onesimus would serve nicely as Philemon’s representative and substitute (Wright 1986, 183).
 - b. Keener (2014, 635) notes that, “Slaves were sometimes freed by their masters to become slaves of the temple of some god; here Paul asks that Philemon free Onesimus for the service of the gospel.”
10. But in deference to Philemon, he will not presume to keep Onesimus without his consent.
 - a. Paul had given up his rights (vv. 8–9); now he gives up his preferences (Wright 1986, 183).
 - b. “He appeals not to his own authority but to Philemon’s honor as a friend” (Keener 2014, 635).
 - c. At the same time, his concern for Onesimus is evident, no little thing since “runaway slaves were known to be fearful of being captured and taken back to their masters” (Keener 2014, 635).
11. Paul was teaching two important principles:
 - a. “Onesimus may have repented, but he still has to make restitution. Thus Paul gives up Onesimus, but a greater sacrifice is demanded of Onesimus” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 111).
 - b. Regarding Philemon, “the good that humans do must come from them spontaneously and of their own free will, and not because of any necessity or constraint” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 112).
 - c. Stated another way: the highest moral developmental stage involves both the right act and the right motive.

A Suggestion in View of God’s Purpose (vv. 15–16)

12. Verse 15, connected to verses 13–14 with “for” (γάρ; *gar*), expresses a what-if. Perhaps (τάχα, *tacha*; elsewhere only in Rom 5.7) Onesimus had been separated (χωρίζω, *chōrizō*)⁵ from Philemon so he would “get him back forever” (ESV; ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης; *hina aiōnion auto apechēs*).
 - a. “Get him back” (ἀπέχω, *apechō*) is a bookkeeping term found in business receipts; but in this case, Philemon is not getting his property (slave) back, but rather a brother in Christ (Keener 2024, 635; also Fitzmeyer 2000, 113).

- b. “Forever” (αἰώνιον, *aiōnion*) is not used in the sense of endless time, but in the qualitative spiritual sense of someone who is concerned with eternity’s priorities.
13. As verse 16 elaborates, Onesimus will no longer be a slave, but a “dearly loved brother” (see v. 1).
- a. “This is not a request for emancipation. It simply applies what is said about relations between Christian masters and slaves in, e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:22 or Colossians 3:22–4:1. Even if Onesimus returns to his post, he can never again be merely a slave, a walking household utility” (Wright 1986, 185).
14. Philemon, therefore, has three options, the last two of which are better in that Onesimus will be treated as a beloved brother.
- a. He can take Onesimus back and punish him, as the law would allow (not what Paul desires).
 - b. He can take him back as a slave, restore him to the family, and allow him to do his job in faithfulness and loyalty, as Colossians 3.22–4.1 prescribes.
 - c. He can free Onesimus and send him as a Christian freedman back to help Paul in his evangelization; Paul is subtly implying this, but in no way commanding it (Fitzmeyer 2000, 114–115).
15. We should take note of what this text shows us about God’s superintendence and providence.
- a. Verses 15–16 certainly entertain the possibility that the events occurred providentially.
 - b. But do not minimize Paul’s use of “perhaps” (τάχα, *tacha*) in verse 15.
 - 1) “In this process, of attempting to understand a situation from God’s point of view and so responding to it in a Christian fashion, there is always room for *restrained speculation* about the providential purpose that may underlie curious events” (Wright 1986, 184; my emphasis).
 - 2) There are times when Scripture reveals that God’s hand was directly involved in events.
 - 3) But in the absence of specific revelation about events we experience, we should exercise restraint in what we say about them, respecting the balance of God’s superintendence and human freedom.

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Works Cited

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Notes

- ¹ As seen in [part 2](#), themes mentioned in the greeting are repeated in the remainder of the letter: love (vv. 5, 9), the Lord (vv. 3, 5, 16, 20, 25), partnership (vv. 6, 17), the good (vv. 6, 14), heart (entrails; vv. 7, 12, 20), refresh (vv. 7, 20), and brother (vv. 7, 20).
- ² Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the CSB; emphasis in the quotations added by the author.
- ³ Leviticus 19.32 – “You are to rise in the presence of the elderly and honor the old. Fear your God; I am the LORD.” Sirach 8.6 – “Do not disdain one who is old, for some of us are also growing old” (NRSV).
- ⁴ Fitzmeyer (2000, 108) notes that the “chains” are probably not literal as Paul’s “arrest was probably of the sort called *custodia libera* (liberal detention) in the Roman world of his time... It denoted, however, a form of detention that would prevent escape.”
- ⁵ For other examples of χαρίζω, see Matt 19.6; Mark 10.9; Rom 8.35, 39; 1 Cor 7.10, 15.