



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Final Appeal, Promise, and Expectation

Philemon 17–25

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Here, at the climax of the letter, we witness nothing less than the radical application of the doctrine of justification in everyday living. No Christian has the right to refuse a welcome to one whom God has welcomed. Faith in Christ, the basis of justification, is the basis also of *koinōnia*. Justification by faith must result in fellowship by faith. This latter means the settled determination to share fully in mutual fellowship with all those who share the faith, however awkward or angular or muddled or misguided, or simply *different*, they may be, or appear to be (Wright 1986, 186).

Setting the Stage

1. As in verse 8, verses 17–22 look back to what precedes them: “*So, if ...*” (Εἰ οὖν; *Ei oun*) (v. 17).¹
2. In verse 17, we read the first of four imperative verbs in verses 17–22 (the first imperatives in the letter), which we will use to guide our discussion.

Paul’s Appeal, Promise, and Expectation (vv. 17–22)

Imperative # 1 – Welcome Onesimus as you would me (v. 17)

3. Paul finally issues a command, rooted in the premise assumed in verses 14–16.
 - a. Onesimus, who had been separated from Philemon, is returning, not merely as a slave, but “as a dearly loved brother” (v. 16).
 - b. Because Onesimus is now a “partner” (κοινωνός, *koinōnos*) like Paul—implied in the fact that he is now a brother and has been serving as Paul’s co-worker—Philemon is commanded to “welcome [προσλαβού, *proslabou*] him as you would me” (v. 17).
 - 1) “Partner” (*koinōnos*) is a cognate of “participation” (*koinōnia*) in verse 6 where, in context, the term refers to Philemon’s participation with the entire church, of which Onesimus is now part.
 - c. To foreshadow the entirety of verses 17–21, what Paul depicts is a living example of the “ministry of reconciliation” elaborated in 2 Corinthians 5.17–21 (cf. esp. vv. 19, 21).
 - 1) “What we find in the letter to Philemon as a whole is the extraordinary, and almost shocking, fact that Paul is reconciling master and slave by taking on himself the role of Christ. For Onesimus’ sake God makes Paul a debtor to Philemon (even though he owes him nothing), so that in Paul Onesimus may find a welcome into the church and home where he now truly belongs. God is in Paul reconciling Philemon and Onesimus. This is the Christ-shaped ministry of which Paul wrote in Colossians 1:24–29” (Wright 1986, 187).

Imperative # 2 – Charge Onesimus’s wrong to my account (vv. 18–19)

4. Verse 18a alludes to some wrong Paul knows Onesimus has done. It’s impossible to say what that was, “but,” as Wright comments, “it would be very odd to say what he does if he knew that Philemon had no grounds for complaint, or even if he were simply unsure about the matter” (Wright 1986, 187).²
5. Whatever Onesimus’s sin, Paul tells Philemon to charge it to his account, and promises he will make it right (vv. 18b–19).
 - a. “Account” is the 2PS imperative form of ἐλλογέω (*ellogēō*), “a commercial t.t. [technical term] meaning, ‘to charge to someone’s account’” (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 514) (v. 18).
 - b. He then says he will repay it—and adds that Philemon owes him his “very self” (v. 19).
 - 1) Keener (2014, 636) notes that “Paul employs language normally used for formally assuming debts; letters acknowledging debt normally included the promise, ‘I will repay’ and were signed by the debtor in his own handwriting.” Paul is guaranteeing the debt (Fitzmeyer 2000, 118).
 - 2) Notice that the personal pronoun (ἐγώ, *egō*) at the beginning of verse 19 is emphatic.
6. The last part of verse 19 again uses the rhetorical technique of not mentioning something in order to mention it.
 - a. It also assumes the ancient social custom whereby “friends were bound by the reciprocal obligation of repaying favors; Philemon owes Paul the greatest favor—his ‘self,’ his new life in conversion” (Keener 2014, 636).

Imperative # 3 – Refresh my heart in Christ (vv. 20–21)

7. Verse 20 adds another layer to the appeal for reciprocity.
 - a. Wright brings out the mood of the Greek in his translation: “Yes, my brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in the Messiah” (NTFE).
 - b. “Benefit” (ὠνάϊμην, *onaimēn*) is a cognate of “Onesimus,” “and the whole tone of the passage, backed up by the word-play of verse 11, strongly suggests that the pun is again deliberate” (Wright 1986, 189).
 - c. “Refresh my heart” (σπλάγχχνον, *splanchnon*) recalls verse 7, and adds an emotional component to the appeal to Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother.
8. Verse 21 adds yet another level of emphasis.
 - a. “Since I am confident of” captures the sense of the perfect participle, πεποιθώς (*pepoithōs*), to persuade, be persuaded; the sense is that Paul has been and remains confident about Philemon’s friendship and commitment.
 - b. “Obedience” (ὕπακοή, *hypakoē*) is used in a broader sense than giving orders, and certainly does not refer to “blind obedience.” It’s a word “Paul regularly uses to indicate the total response of the whole person to the summons of God in the gospel (Rom. 1:5; 6:16; 15:18; 16:19, 26; 2 Cor. 7:15; 10:5-6)” (Wright 1986, 189).³
9. In “the second climax in the letter” (Fitzmeyer 2000, 122), Paul expresses confidence that Philemon will “do even more than I say” (v. 21).
 - a. This may hint at emancipation for Onesimus, either then or when Paul comes to stay (cf. v. 16: “more than a slave ...”); that conclusion is reasonable, but Paul is not explicit about it.

Imperative # 4 – Prepare a guest room for me (v. 22)

10. “Meanwhile” captures the sense of verse 22 in that Paul has not yet been freed to visit Philemon.
11. “Prepare a guest room” is literally “prepare for me hospitality” (ξενία, *xenia*), a consideration that was

expected in the culture.

12. Paul's hope is that he will be "graciously given to you" (ESV; better than "restored" in CSB, NIV). The verb is *χαρίζομαι* (*charizomai*); the passive voice "suggests that it is God alone who can secure Paul's release" (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 515).

Final Greetings (vv. 23–25)

13. The list of names in the greeting is nearly identical to Colossians 4.10–17 and reminds us that Paul's was not a solo ministry.
14. An interesting aside to think about is the presence of both Mark and Luke, two of the writers associated with the gospels (cf. Luke 1.2–3).

A Fitting Conclusion

Thus we have a private epistle from which much should be learned how brethren are to be commended, that is, that an example might be provided to the church how we ought to take care of those who fall and restore those who err; for the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of mercy and grace, while the kingdom of Satan is a kingdom of murder, error, darkness, and lies. ~ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* 29. 105; trans. J. Pelikan; in Fitzmeyer 2000, 126

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Works Cited

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- . 2019. *The New Testament for Everyone: A Fresh Translation* (NTFE). 3rd edition. Zondervan.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the CSB, with emphasis in the quotations added by the author.

² Fitzmeyer (2000, 117) writes, "Onesimus, he knows, has wronged Philemon in some way, possibly by dipping his hand into funds that were entrusted to him or by absconding with them; or in some other less serious way, in which Onesimus might have felt that he was being blamed for something for which he was not entirely at fault. Paul makes no mention of Onesimus' running away, or even of his remorse and regret. This too may be a reason why Paul states the case hypothetically."

Adding to his comment quoted above, Wright (1986, 187) comments, "It seems likely, then, that the young slave had stolen from his master in order to provide for himself at least until he could get to the city."

³ In a footnote, Wright notes that, including Philemon 21, the passages listed represent all of Paul's uses of *hypakoē*, with the exception of Romans 10.16. He uses the verb *ὑπακούω* (*hypakouō*) in Romans 6.12, 16-17; 10.16; Ephesians 6.1, 5; Philippians 2.12; Colossians 3.20, 22; 2 Thessalonians 1.8; 3.14.