



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Philemon 1: 1-25 .

Background of the reading

Paul is writing this letter to Philemon and others who stayed in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor located in the upper Lycus River valley about 110 miles east of Ephesus, ten miles east of Laodicea, and twelve miles southeast of Hierapolis.

Well-to-do owners of homes in which ancient religious groups met were normally granted positions of honour in those groups, as their patrons. Patrons granted favours to and acted as political sponsors for their clients, or social dependents. The obligations in the relationship were viewed as reciprocal; clients were to grant the patrons honour as their benefactors. Ancient writers defined households not by blood relations but by hierarchical relationships: the free man and his wife, children and slaves (though only those with sizable incomes could afford slaves). The addressees are located in Phrygia

Paul kept times of regular prayer, a normal pious Jewish practice (probably at least two hours a day); Thanksgivings were common in letters, and Paul here in 4–7 follows his usual custom of using his thanksgiving as a complimentary *introduction*. Such *intros* were commonly used in speeches to praise the hearers, thus securing their favour.

The term *koinonia* translated “fellowship” or “sharing” was often used for business partnerships or for sharing possessions (see v. 7). It means a *close mutual relationship participation, sharing in; partnership; contribution, gift*. Philemon acts as a patron for the church in Phrygia (v. 2).

Hospitality was considered a paramount virtue in Greco-Roman antiquity, especially in Judaism. Well-to-do hosts often gathered those one rung below them on the economic ladder, sometimes members of their own religious group, to their home and provided a meal; Philemon and other well-to-do Christians sponsored the meals in their house churches. Mention of a shared friendship between the writer and recipient was a common feature of ancient letters; it was especially important in letters of friendship or when the writer was about to request a favour from the letter's recipient.

Although Philemon has high social status—something particularly valued in his culture—he recognizes Paul's higher spiritual rank in the faith. Philosophers were often sponsored by such well-to-do persons as lecturers at banquets or teachers, but Paul claims a higher role than a mere philosopher would fill. Philosophers could be clients of wealthy patrons, but Paul implies that he is Philemon's spiritual patron here. Philosophers used the expression "what you ought to do" as a criterion for ethical judgments.

Rhetorians (those who specialized in public speaking) liked to argue this way: "I could remind you of this, but I won't"—thus reminding while pretending not to do so. Respect for age was important in his culture, so Paul appeals to his age. Shared friendship was also used as the basis for a request; friends were socially obligated to grant and return favours.

Teachers often called disciples "sons." The point of Paul's plea is that one could not enslave the son of one's own spiritual patron. Appeals to emotion were a necessary part of ancient argumentation.

Here Paul makes a wordplay on Onesimus's name, which means "useful." It was a common slave name, for obvious reasons. The well-to-do had a stereotype that slaves—explicitly including Phrygian slaves—were lazy and ill-disciplined.

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. He appeals not to his own authority but to

disciples ***Disciples.** Students of rabbis or philosophers, normally committed to memorizing and living according to their master's teachings.

gospel **Gospel.** The term so translated means literally "good news"; it was the sort of good news heralds would bring, and in Isaiah it refers to the specific message of God's restoration and salvation for his people. ("Gospel" as a literary genre, a type of book in the New Testament, is different; on this sense of the term see the introduction to the Gospels.)

Philemon's honour as a friend. Runaway slaves were known to be fearful of being captured and taken back to their masters, and Paul's concern for Onesimus is here evident.

Roman law saw slaves as both people and property; but a full brother would naturally not be viewed as property. The phrase "receive him back" or "have him back" resembles that found in business receipts, but here it is not a property transaction in which Philemon receives Onesimus back as a slave, but like welcoming back a family member.

"Partner" was often a formal business term. In status-conscious Roman society, Paul is telling a social superior who respects his ministry: we are equals, and if you accept Onesimus as my agent (authorized representative), you must accept him as an equal. Ancient letters of recommendation commonly appealed to friends to consider the bearer of the letter "as if he were me."

Here 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. Because it is in writing, this offer would be legally binding in the unlikely event that Philemon would take Paul up on it. But Philemon also owes a debt to Paul; again Paul uses the rhetorical technique of "not to mention" something he then mentions. By ancient social custom, friends were bound by the mutual obligation of repaying favours; Philemon owes Paul the greatest favour—his "self," his new life in conversion.

Paul asks for the same hospitable character that Philemon shows the church.

"Do even more than what I say" means that Philemon will free Onesimus. Professional speakers often sought favours in such terms: "Knowing your goodness, you will gladly hear me" or "grant me such-and-such a request."

Well-to-do patrons offered hospitality, which Paul can expect as Philemon's spiritual peer. Indeed, providing lodging for prominent guests was regarded as an honour.

Amen

Sermon

⁶ *I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full*

understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

Paul also presents Philemon with a choice: free Onesimus, once your slave, now a brother in Christ, and in doing so demonstrate the life-changing reality of your faith. The decision to free a slave represented the loss of a substantial amount of capital, and so this really is a demand to 'put your money where your mouth is'. If Philemon does not do this, then his faith will be shown to be empty and fruitless.

In short we must put our faith into action, put our deeds of faith where our mouths are!

I think this is sometimes very difficult for us to maintain. It is easier to talk about faith or to moan about people's lack of faith.

I heard an amazing story this week that illustrates this point.

A very well off Christian family's son joined the army. After a few months of no contact he one day phoned his mother. She was very relieved to hear from him again. He said to her that he would be coming home, but just to visit. She was over the moon. He then asked her if he could bring a friend along. But before she could respond he said however she must know that his friend does not have his two arms or one leg any longer as he lost them in battle. She then said "Oh well we cannot really cater for him or take care of him properly but I will arrange a Bed and Breakfast for him to stay in! He then tried hard to convince his mother to please consider having him stay with them but she refused. He then closed the conversation telling her when he would be arriving. Three days later she was called by the chaplain telling her that her son, who recently lost both his arms and one leg in battle, had committed suicide!

I think this story illustrate how we sometimes deal with ordinary daily events forgetting our responsibilities as people of God and as followers of Jesus Christ's ultimate example of love, mercy and forgiveness. It is as if we tend to make a difference in the way we act as Christians from a Sunday to an ordinary day of the week.

Sometimes we totally miss the point – if we have faith and trust in God we must show it in the small and larger things that we do in life, in the challenging situations, in life threatening scenarios and in all our joyful moments.

Paul is urging Philemon to act justly and lovingly because he is different. He is now just like Onesimus – a freed slave from sin, death and hell!

May we find the strength to put our faith where our hands, legs, feet and mouths are!

Amen