

## *Second Baptist Church of Doylestown*

### *Philemon 1*

*9/30/15*

**1:1** Paul wrote this letter from Rome in about A.D. 60, when he was under house arrest (see Acts 28:30-31). Onesimus was a domestic slave who belonged to Philemon, a wealthy man and a member of the church in Colossae. Onesimus had run away from Philemon and had made his way to Rome, where he met Paul, who apparently led him to Christ (1:10). Paul convinced Onesimus that running from his problems wouldn't solve them, and he persuaded Onesimus to return to his master. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to ask him to be reconciled to his runaway slave.

**1:1** Timothy's name is included with Paul's in 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon—the last three of these letters are from a group known as the "Prison Letters." Timothy was one of Paul's trusted companions; Paul wrote two letters to him—1 and 2 Timothy. See Timothy's profile. **1:1** Philemon was a Greek landowner living in Colossae. He had been converted under Paul's ministry, and the Colossian church met in his home. Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves.

**1:2** Apphia may have been Philemon's wife. Archippus may have been Philemon's son or perhaps an elder in the Colossian church. In either case, Paul included him as a recipient of the letter, possibly so Archippus could read the letter with Philemon and encourage him to take Paul's advice.

**1:2** The early churches often would meet in people's homes. Because of sporadic persecutions and the great expense involved, church buildings were typically not constructed at this time.

**1:4-7** Like cold water on a long hike, this Christian brother Philemon knew how to be refreshing. He was able to revive and restore his brothers and sisters in the faith. His love and generosity had replenished and stimulated them. Philemon also encouraged Paul by his love and loyalty. Are you a refreshing influence on others, or do your attitude and temperament add to the burden they carry? Instead of draining others' energy and motivation with complaints and problems, replenish their spirits by encouragement, love, and a helpful attitude.

**1:6** Paul's prayer for Philemon was setting the stage for the request Paul would make in this letter. Philemon was active in his faith and generous in sharing its blessings. As he gained fuller understanding of all that Christ had done on his behalf, this knowledge should cause him to respond appropriately to Paul's request regarding Onesimus. Are you active and effective in sharing with others your faith, your resources, and your love?

**1:8-9** Because Paul was an elder and an apostle, he could have used his authority with Philemon, commanding him to deal kindly with his runaway slave. But Paul based his request

not on his own authority but on Philemon's Christian commitment. Paul wanted Philemon's heartfelt, not grudging, obedience. When you know something is right and you have the power to demand it, do you appeal to your authority or to the other person's commitment? Paul provides a good example of how to deal with conflict between Christians. When reconciling a separation or mediating a dispute, trust must be rebuilt between the conflicting parties. Notice the steps that Paul used to help rebuild the trust: (1) He identified with those involved, calling Philemon "brother" and Onesimus "my son." (2) He requested, not ordered, Philemon to do the right thing. (3) He sought Philemon's voluntary consent, not his submission to rules or authority. (4) He appealed to Christian love, not to power or authority. (5) He agreed to absorb the loss and pay any cost for restoration. Instead of overusing power or position, use Paul's approach to rebuild a trusting relationship.

**1:10** A master had the legal right to kill a runaway slave, so Onesimus feared for his life. Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to help him understand his new relationship with Onesimus, who was now a Christian brother, not a mere possession. "Who became my son" means that Onesimus had become a Christian.

**1:10-25** From his prison cell, Paul had led Onesimus to the Lord. Paul asked Philemon to forgive his runaway slave who had become a Christian and, even going beyond forgiveness, to accept Onesimus as a brother. As Christians, we should forgive as we have been forgiven (Matthew 6:12; Ephesians 4:31-32). True forgiveness means that we treat the one we've forgiven as we would want to be treated. Is there someone you say you have forgiven but who still needs your kindness?

**1:11-15** Onesimus means "useful." Paul used a play on words, saying that Onesimus had not been much use to Philemon in the past but now had become very useful to both Philemon and Paul. Although Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him, he was sending Onesimus back, requesting that Philemon accept him not only as a forgiven runaway servant but also as a brother in Christ.

**1:15-16** Slavery was widespread throughout the Roman Empire. In these early days, Christians did not have the political power to change the slavery system. Paul didn't condemn or condone slavery, but he worked to transform relationships. The gospel begins to change social structures by changing the people within those structures. (See also 1 Corinthians 7:20-24; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1 for more on master/slave relationships.)

**1:16** What a difference Onesimus's status as a Christian made in his relationship to Philemon. He was no longer merely a slave, but he was also a brother. That meant that both Onesimus and Philemon were members of God's family—equals in Christ. A Christian's status as a member of God's family transcends all other distinctions among believers. Do you look down on any fellow Christians? Remember, they are your equals before Christ (Galatians 3:28). How you treat your brothers and sisters in Christ's family reflects your true Christian commitment.

**1:17** Paul called Philemon his "partner," but he did not mean a partner in the business sense of the word. Philemon was a partner in grace. Paul and Philemon shared the same experience in

Jesus Christ of being saved; in that sense, they were equals. Too often our relationships in the church don't possess true partnership but reflect merely tolerance of one another. Do you have room in your heart to welcome other believers warmly? Treat them as partners in God's grace and love, not just fellow workers. Let your common interests in Christ and your common feeling of gratitude for Christ's love knit you together with others.

**1:17-19** Paul genuinely loved Onesimus. Paul showed his love by personally guaranteeing payment for any stolen goods or wrongs for which Onesimus might be responsible. Paul's investment in the life of this new believer certainly encouraged and strengthened Onesimus's faith. Are there young believers who need you to demonstrate such self-sacrifice toward them? Be grateful when you can invest in the lives of others, helping them with Bible study, prayer, encouragement, support, and friendship.

**1:19** Philemon owed himself to Paul, meaning that Paul had led Philemon to Christ. Because Paul was Philemon's spiritual father, he was hoping that Philemon would feel a debt of gratitude that he would repay by accepting Onesimus with a spirit of forgiveness.

**1:22** Paul was released from prison soon after writing this letter, but the Bible doesn't say whether or not he returned to Colossae.

**1:23** Epaphras was well known to the Colossians because he had founded the church there (Colossians 1:7). He was a hero to this church, helping to hold it together in spite of growing persecution and struggles with false doctrine. His report to Paul about the problems in Colossae had prompted Paul to write his letter to the Colossians. Epaphras's greetings to the Colossian Christians reveal his deep love for them (Colossians 4:12-13). He may have been in prison with Paul for preaching the gospel.

**1:24** Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are also mentioned in Colossians 4:10, 14. Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25-13:5). Mark also wrote the Gospel of Mark. Luke had accompanied Paul on his third missionary journey and was the writer of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Demas had been faithful to Paul for a while but later deserted him (see 2 Timothy 4:10).

**1:25** Paul urged Philemon to be reconciled to his slave, receiving him as a brother and fellow member of God's family. Reconciliation means reestablishing relationship. Christ has reconciled us to God and to others. Many barriers come between people—race, social status, sex, personality differences—but Christ can break down these barriers. Jesus Christ changed Onesimus's relationship to Philemon from slave to brother. Christ can transform our most hopeless relationships into deep and loving friendships.