

Philemon 8-25— A Story Of Grace

Memory Verse:

Philemon 1:18 NKJV

But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

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Philemon 1-25 NKJV

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer, ² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵ hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶ that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷ For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

⁸ Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

¹⁵ For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow labourers.

²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

1. Summary of vs 1-7

v 1 **Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus:** Paul is a prisoner in Rome, awaiting his first trial before Caesar while chained to a guard in his own rented house.

v 1-2 **To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow labourer, ² to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier:** Most likely, Paul is writing to his **beloved friend and fellow labourer** Philemon, Philemon's (**beloved**) wife Apphia, and Philemon's son (**fellow soldier**) Archippus. The reason being that Paul's request to forgive and free their runaway slave Onesimus will affect the whole family.

v 2 **To the church in your house:** The early church was made up of many house churches, with a leader over the city or area to keep them accountable. There were no dedicated church buildings until about 300 AD.

A quote from Jon Courson: "I like this phrase! People say to me, "I wish I were in the ministry."

And I say, "You can be tonight! Train your kids in the ways of God. Minister to them. Teach them the Word. Pray with them. Serve Communion to them. Build your family. Your house is your church."

"But I'm just a teenager," you say.

Then be nice to your little brother or sister and talk to them about the Lord!

Listen, gang, everyone should be in the ministry because the ministry needed most is right there under your own roof. Philemon's family was one dedicated to the Lord. And evidently, Philemon and Apphia not only ministered to their own family but also opened their house and ministered to others."

v 5 **I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers:** We often only pray for people when they are sick or hurting, but forget to pray for them when they are doing well. Here, Paul is praying for Philemon as he is doing well that he will do even better, that the sharing (koinonia) of his faith will become even more effective.

Remember that Satan will attack Christians most when they are doing well, with the goal of making them ineffective. Our prayers for others can be like preventative medicine, protecting people from Satan's attacks. We need to support those in the frontlines, not just care for the wounded.

v 6 **That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus:** "Let me ask you this question: Do you think the people at your job, on your campus, or in your neighbourhood see in you such joy, peace, and love that they wish they knew your secret? Such was the case with Philemon." (Jon Courson)

v 7 **For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother:** The overflow of love, the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit in us as we are submitted to or yielded to Him refreshes others. The alternative is that we grieve and sadden each other as we walk according to our old nature. Remember what love looks like: joyful, kind, peace loving, patient, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled—it sure is refreshing to be around people like this.

2. For love's sake—appealing vs commanding

Philemon 8-9b, 14 NKJV

Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you... But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

Paul had a choice. Firstly, he could use his authority as an apostle to command Philemon and his family to do what he wanted, knowing or believing that it was God's will for Onesimus to be freed from being a slave and return to Rome and help Paul in ministry. To put it simply and bluntly, "I know that this is the right thing to do, so do it."

There are times when this is necessary. An example is when Paul commanded the church in Corinth to excommunicate the unrepentant sinning brother. *"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* (1 Corinthians 5:4-5).

Again, there are times when it is necessary for those in authority, whether it be in the church, family, work, military, government etc, to make difficult decisions that will not be liked by those under them. The criteria should be that it is for their own good, and, if not for the use of authority or command, they would make bad choices that would cause irreversible and regrettable consequences (like leading to addictions, physical harm, significant material loss, pregnancy, or other long term negative consequences).

Consider a scenario where your fourteen year old son is head over heels infatuated with a girl who invites him to a party where there will be heavy drug use and other wicked and immoral behaviour. As a father and mother, you know what will happen to him if you let him go to the party, and you know that he isn't thinking straight—he isn't in the right frame of mind to know what is best for himself. So you say "no" to him, knowing that he won't understand at the time, but it is obviously the best thing for him—your doing it to protect your son from himself.

Other examples in the family where command should be used include restricting phone and device use (to halt or prevent addiction to them and access to the internet and social media), and controlling which friends they socialise with. Often they will not be in a frame of mind where they can make good decisions for themselves as they crave acceptance from their peers.

However, there are many circumstances where people, especially children, even when they are not in a good state of mind, should not be commanded, but rather appealed to out of love or commonsense, even knowing that they most likely won't listen to reason. Why? Because otherwise they will never learn from their mistakes. When the

consequences are not so serious (not leading to addictions, physical harm, significant material loss, pregnancy, or other long term negative consequences), let them fail, and then they will learn—natural consequences are the best teacher—it's the only way to learn that their choices have consequences. This applies to how they spend their money, how they use their time, how hard they choose to work, and many other scenarios.

v 8-10, 14 **Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you... I appeal to you for my son Onesimus... But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.** Obviously, Paul didn't command Philemon and his family. Instead he appealed to them out of love. Why?

- Because they were walking with the Lord, and were in a good state of mind to make good and godly decisions.
- Commanding them would have most likely resulted in them obeying Paul under compulsion, feeling forced, and therefore feeling obligated and angry that they had to give up something or someone against their will (*But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary*—v 14).
- There would be no eternal reward for them if they were forced to do what Paul commanded them to do (*But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great—Luke 6:35 NKJV, For if I do this willingly, I have a reward—1 Corinthians 9:17 NKJV*). No-one would ever know their true motive if they did it without having a choice in the matter.

This shows Paul's wisdom in knowing when to use his God given authority to command people, versus appealing and leaving the decision up to the other party. Another example is: "*Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to come to you with the brethren, but he was quite unwilling to come at this time; however, he will come when he has a convenient time*" (1 Corinthians 16:12 NKJV).

3. Paul's situation and reason for his request

Philemon 9b-10 NKJV

...being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

When appealing to love, it's always good to give the honest reasons why we need or want something. Paul gives good reasons for wanting Philemon and his family to free Onesimus from being a slave and forgive him any crime that he had committed against them.

- He was old (**the aged**), and a **prisoner** and thus probably needed some help to look after himself (little or nothing was provided by the state).
- Onesimus had proven to be a great help while with Paul, and Paul sensed that Onesimus had found his calling as a missionary working under Paul in Rome (**but is now profitable to you and me... whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel—vs 11, 13**)

4. Paul's request—free Onesimus and let him return to help me

Philemon 10-13 NKJV

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹ who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.

v 10, 13 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus... whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel: Paul is asking Philemon and his family to free **Onesimus** (release him from being a slave), so that Onesimus can then go back to Rome and help Paul.

The background is that **Onesimus** was a runaway slave who had escaped from his master Philemon. By God's providence, **Onesimus** ended up in Rome and 'just happened' to meet Paul, even though Paul was under house arrest. Paul then led Onesimus to Christ (**whom I have begotten while in my chains**—v 10). It was Paul who had led Philemon to faith in Christ (see v 19).

David Guzik explains the cultural background in the situation of an escaped slave. "When Paul made this appeal on behalf of **Onesimus**, he followed deep traditions in Roman culture. There was an ancient Greek law (inherited by the Romans) allowing any escaped slave sanctuary at an altar. The altar could even be the hearth of a private family home; then the head of the family was obligated to give the slave protection while he tried to persuade him to return to his master. If the slave refused, the head of the family would put the slave up for auction and give the price for the slave to the former master. Paul gave **Onesimus** protection, and now was working the issue out with Philemon."

v 10 **My son Onesimus**: Paul regularly spoke of his converts as his "children", demonstrating his deep love and concern for these new believers. Other examples of those Paul converted being referred to as his 'children' are: Timothy (1 Corinthians 4:17), Titus (Titus 1:4), the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 4:14) and the Galatian Christians (Galatians 4:19).

v 11 **Who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me**: As a runaway slave, Onesimus was **unprofitable** to Philemon. However, while Onesimus was helping Paul, he was **profitable** to both Paul and Philemon in the sense that, since Philemon loved Paul, Philemon would be glad that Paul was being helped by Onesimus (**but now is profitable to you and to me**)—it would be like Philemon was helping Paul.

"When Paul spoke of Onesimus being **unprofitable** and **profitable**, he made a play on a word. The name **Onesimus** means *profitable*. Now that he was a Christian, Onesimus could live up to his name." (David Guzik)

"It is significant to note that Paul claims that in Christ the useless person has been made useful." (Barclay)

5. Reconciliation and repentance—setting things right when we have wronged others

Philemon 12 NKJV

I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart.

v 12 **I am sending him back:** It seems that Onesimus had done something wrong before running away, most likely theft (But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account—v 18). So there were two reasons for Paul to send Onesimus back home to Philemon, to reconcile the wrong of running away, and the wrong of stealing from his master.

This establishes an important principle—*we must make things right with others before we can be right with God*. Onesimus had been with Paul long enough to be saved, and to learn that he must now make things right with his master Philemon.

Matthew 5:23-24 NKJV

Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. *First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

Remember that we can't claim to love God if we are not loving our brother.

1 John 3:7-16 NLT

Dear children, don't let anyone deceive you about this: When people do what is right, it shows that they are righteous, even as Christ is righteous. ⁸ But when people keep on sinning [habitual sin, no repentance], it shows that they belong to the devil, who has been sinning since the beginning. But the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ Those who have been born into God's family do not make a practice of sinning [continue sinning with no repentance], because God's life is in them. So they can't keep on sinning, because they are children of God. ¹⁰ **So now we can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God.**

¹¹ This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹² We must not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and killed his brother. And why did he kill him? Because Cain had been doing what was evil, and his brother had been doing what was righteous. ¹³ So don't be surprised, dear brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.

¹⁴ **If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life. But a person who has no love is still dead. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don't have eternal life within them.**

¹⁶ *We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

Remember from last week that in choosing to not forgive and instead take offence at something someone does or says, or doesn't do or doesn't say, results in a fence, a barrier to *koinonia* (fellowship and partnership). Therefore even believers can behave as unbelievers, because their hearts have been poisoned by a root of bitterness—they can't enjoy true Christian fellowship and partnership (*koinonia*) if they have chosen to, over time, take offence to many things, and therefore allowed the offences to create a fence between them and the other person—they have allowed the devil a place in their lives, and the devil is never a good influence.

Remember, this is why the Scripture says, “*Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, ²⁷ nor give place to the devil*” (Ephesians 4:26-27 NKJV). Yes, we may be hurt by what the other person has done to us, but we must be honest with them about what they have said and/or done, and deal with the issue. Not saying anything when we are hurt is the same thing as taking offence—we are choosing to burry that hurt deep inside, where it will turn into a root of bitterness—we are giving the devil a foothold in our lives. Instead, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16 NKJV).

v 12 **You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart (literally affections):** Onesimus must humble himself and be willing to go back to Philemon and take whatever consequence or forgiveness comes his way. Also, there is no way that either Paul or Onesimus can know how Philemon will react. Philemon can either choose to forgive or take offence towards Onesimus: Consider the risk Paul is taking, if Philemon takes offence towards (rejects) Onesimus, he will also be taking offence towards (or rejecting) Paul.

Therefore, Paul earnestly asks Philemon to **receive** (and not reject) Onesimus, assuring Philemon that this request was from his **own heart**. The NLT translates verse 12, “I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.” *The implication here is that Paul was telling Philemon that he loved and deeply cared for Onesimus, and so this request was very personal and important to him—if Philemon rejected Onesimus, he would be rejecting Paul.* Interestingly, Philemon's name means “affectionate” or “one who is kind”—this could be another play on words, will Philemon live up to his name? Will he respond to Paul's deep affection with like affection or coldness?

The cultural background—how slaves were usually poorly treated

To understand why Paul was making such a careful and persuasive appeal to Philemon to deal gently with Onesimus, we need to understand the Roman culture of the day and learn about what could, and usually would, happen to runaway slaves, or even just slaves who made mistakes.

“Under Roman law the slave owner had complete and total control over his slave. It wasn't unusual for slaves to be crucified for lesser offenses than escaping. One ancient writer described how a slave carried a tray of crystal goblets, and he dropped and broke one. The master instantly demanded the slave be thrown into a fishpond full of lampreys that tore the slave to pieces.” (David Guzik)

“Roman law ... practically imposed no limits to the power of the master over his slave. The alternative of life or death rested solely with Philemon, and slaves were constantly crucified for far lighter offenses than this.” (Lightfoot)

6. God’s providence—everything has a purpose

Philemon 15-16 NKJV

For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ 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.

v 15 **Departed for a while:** This is a gentle way of saying, “the slave escaped”.

v 15 **For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose:** We are reminded of what Joseph said to his brothers, “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Genesis 50:20 NKJV), and also what Paul wrote to the Roman church, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). To Philemon and his family, when Onesimus ran away, it would have been a difficult time, like when a small business owner loses his only employee—they wouldn’t have seen much good in it, and their life would have become much more difficult.

v 15 **For perhaps:** Paul saw God’s hand in Onesimus’s escape, journey to Rome, meeting with himself, and subsequent conversion and ministry involvement. However, Paul writes this saying, “**for perhaps**”, or “it seems to me”, allowing Philemon to come to his own conclusion on the matter.

v 15-16 **That you may receive him forever, ¹⁶ 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:** This is the good purpose that Paul saw coming out of this apparently bad situation. Onesimus was no longer a slave, but a brother in Christ, *both spiritually and practically (both in the flesh and in the Lord)*. This was a revolutionary concept, and entirely went against the culture and norms of the day.

“Paul “re-introduced” Onesimus to Philemon; not as a slave, but as a brother. In this relationship as brothers and not slaves, Paul effectively abolished the sting of the “master-slave” relationship and laid the foundation for the eventual legal abolition of slavery. If a man is a stranger, I might make him my slave. But how can my brother be my slave?

This breaking of the distinction between master and slave was an absolutely revolutionary development. It did far more to change society than the passing of a law prohibiting slavery.” (David Guzik)

“What the letter to Philemon does is to bring the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die. *Where master and slave were united in affection as brothers in Christ, formal emancipation (freeing of slaves) would be but a matter of expediency, the legal confirmation of their new relationship.*” (Bruce)

7. A picture of grace: a practical demonstration of what it means for Christ to be our Saviour, willingly standing in our place, taking our guilt, and bearing the penalty of our sin

Philemon 17-19 NKJV

If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me. ¹⁸ But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

v 17 **If then you count me as a partner (Greek: *koinonia*), receive him as you would me:** Again, Paul stands by Onesimus and requests mercy on his behalf, essentially saying to Philemon, “If you have fellowship with me, if you are a partner with me in the Lord’s work, then treat Onesimus as you would me.”

“Paul’s appeal is powerful because he stood beside a guilty man and said to the owner of the slave, “I know this man is a criminal and deserves punishment. Yet this slave is my friend, so if you punish him punish me also. I stand beside him to take his punishment.” This is what Jesus does for us before our master, God the Father.” (David Guzik)

Remember also that Jesus and the Father are in perfect harmony, experience perfect unity, and are in perfect partnership: they have perfect *koinonia*. So when Jesus says this to the Father on our behalf, we know that the Father will always listen to Jesus’s plea on our behalf.

v 18 **But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay:** “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23 NKJV), and so is the penalty of a slave both for stealing and running away from his master. *Paul is making himself, in a practical way, Onesimus’s saviour. Paul is saying, “whatever Onesimus owes you, and however he has wronged you, I will be responsible for paying his debt and bearing his punishment. This is what Jesus does for each of us when we come to Him—we are slaves to sin and owe a great debt to the Father—but Jesus says to the Father, I personally promise to pay his debt, please accept him as You accept Me.*

Like Paul asked Philemon to put Onesimus’s legal liabilities onto his account, so Jesus takes our spiritual sin debt and puts it onto his account.

2 Corinthian 5:21 NKJV

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

“Here we see how Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master, and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also does Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all his Onesimi, to my thinking.” (Luther)

v 19 **Not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides:** Paul reminds Philemon that he owes him his very self, meaning his salvation. Earlier on Paul led Philemon to the Lord, so in a sense Philemon owes Paul his very life. Paul is basically saying, “I have a lot of credit with you, I know that I have enough to cover this.”

8. Hope: Paul is confident of a positive response from Philemon

Philemon 20-22 NKJV

Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. ²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

v 20 **Let me have joy (profit) from you in the Lord:** Here is another play on words. **Joy** translates the Greek word *onimemi* (meaning profitable or beneficial), which is the root word for the name “Onesimus”. Paul is saying to Philemon that it would profit or benefit him if he would let Onesimus return to Paul.

v 20 **Refresh my heart in the Lord:** Philemon was described in verse 7 as someone who refreshed the hearts of the saints—“For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.” Here we see how having an attitude of forgiveness, mercy, and graciousness is so refreshing to others around us—Paul would receive great joy (thanksgiving) and consolation (comfort) if Philemon allowed Onesimus to return to Paul.

v 21 **Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say:** This is another attribute of agape love; it always “believes all things” and “hopes all things” (see 1 Corinthians 13:7). Also, agape love always seeks to go beyond what is necessary to bless the other person.

v 22 **But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me:** This shows the close relationship that Paul had with Philemon, regularly staying at his home and enjoying his hospitality.

v 22 **I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you:** Paul was a praying man who knew the power of prayer. He prayed for others, and was always asking that people pray for him. An example is:

Ephesians 6:18-20 NLT

Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.

¹⁹ And pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God’s mysterious plan that the Good News is for Jews and Gentiles alike. ²⁰ I am in chains now, still preaching this message as God’s ambassador. So pray that I will keep on speaking boldly for him, as I should.

9. Greetings to Philemon from common friends

Philemon 23-25 NKJV

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow labourers.

²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

v 23-24 “**Ephaphras ... Mark ... Aristachus ... my fellow laborers**: Each of these names is also mentioned in the conclusion of the letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:10–17). This confirms that the two letters went to the same place. Philemon lived in Colosse.” (David Guzik)

v 23 **Fellow prisoner**: “Literally ‘a prisoner of war,’ used metaphorically.” (Oesterley)

v 24 **Demas**: Demas stood with Paul until Paul’s second imprisonment when he deserted him, having a greater love for the things of the world (see 2 Timothy 4:10).

10. Summary and conclusion

“No part of the New Testament more clearly demonstrates integrated Christian thinking and living. It offers a blend, utterly characteristic of Paul, of love, wisdom, humour, gentleness, tact, and above all Christian and human maturity.” (Wright)

“Paul never called for an overthrow of the system of slavery, yet the principles in the letter to Philemon destroy slavery. The greatest social changes come when people are changed, one heart at a time. In our society, racism and our low regard for the unborn cannot be eliminated by laws; a change of heart must occur.” (David Guzik)

“Onesimus found there is no freedom in freedom itself, for although he was free from his master, he was still a slave to his own conscience, to his own sin. But Onesimus was to discover that although there is slavery in freedom, there is also freedom in slavery. How? Jesus calls all who are weary and heavy laden to take His yoke upon them, to be chained to Him, so to speak (Matthew 11:28, 29). But He is a good Master, and all do find freedom in “slavery” to Him. That’s why Paul said, “I am a bondsman”—a slave by choice (see Romans 1:1). Marriage proves this point, for it is, in a sense, slavery. And it can either be glorious or miserable, depending on with whom you are linked!

The question in this life is not whether or not you’re yoked, but to Whom are you yoked? If we are yoked to Jesus, we are yoked to the quintessentially excellent Master, to the One who loves us so much, to the One who’s so good for us, and so good to us.” (Jon Courson)