

Matt Henry  
Philemon  
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“Making Lemon Aid”

God’s grace and peace to you...

Some sermons focus on a few verses, some might dare to take on a whole chapter. But we are going to take on a whole book. OK, so it’s Philemon—Paul’s shortest letter, but it’s absolute winner because it’s a book about restoration, reconciliation, refreshment in Christ. Here is a letter that presents a messy situation, and I am marveling at Paul’s approach—the bold request he makes. Rather it be the book of the Bible we can’t find because it’s so short, Philemon deserves to be a go-to book whenever we doubt the claim the gospel has not only on our lives but how we interact with and relate to others. It shows us what it looks like to live as people who have received mercy.

In school, as a kid, we had the Book It! program. That meant getting a personal pan pizza at Pizza Hut. If it meant pizza, I would read any book—especially the short ones. I remember in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I read a Garfield comic book and tried to write a book report about it. Somehow, my teacher was not impressed. She must not have been a cat person. To me, as a kid, it seemed reasonable.

If someone had to do a book report on a book of the Bible, they'd pick Philemon because it's so short. If that were the case, they should say Paul wrote Philemon in the year 59 AD. He wrote from prison in Caesarea. So at this point, he's an older man. His three missionary journeys are behind him. And he'll soon go off to Rome. But this letter is such a gem, because we see Paul's heart, but also his skill as a writer. Take a look at this structure. [SHOW SLIDE]

**A** 1.3 . Epistolary  
**a** 1 , 2 . Names of those with Philemon.  
**b** 3 . Benediction.  
**B** 4.7 . Prayers of St. Paul for Philemon. Philemon.s hospitality.  
**C** 8 . Authority.  
**D** 9 , 10 .. Supplication.  
**E** . 10 . Onesimus, a convert of St. Paul.s.  
**F** 11 , 12 .. Wrong done by Onesimus. Amends made by St. Paul.  
**G** . 12 . To receive Onesimus the same as receiving Paul.  
**H** 13 , 14 . Paul and Philemon.  
**I** 15 . Onesimus.  
**I** 16 .. Onesimus.  
**H** . 16 . Paul and Philemon.  
**G** 17 . To receive Onesimus the same as receiving Paul.  
**F** 18 , 19 .. Wrong done by Onesimus. Amends made by St. Paul.  
**E** . 19 . Philemon a convert of St. Paul.s.  
**D** 20 . Supplication.  
**C** 21 . Authority.  
**B** 22 . Philemon.s hospitality. Prayers of Philemon for Paul.  
**A** 23.25 . Epistolary.  
**a** 23 , 24 . Names of those with Paul.  
**b** 25 . Benediction.

It's a chevron and it forms this symmetry with parallel thoughts. What's neat about this structure is that it all turns around a central point. Without even looking, whatever is at the center is the most important thing. This is really helpful for us when we are trying to get a handle on a book—what's it all about? Is Philemon a missionary thank you letter, or is it a personal, intercessory letter.

Or is it just a letter written from jail? Or is it the shortest of Paul's letters? It all of these things. But if you really want to know who's at the center, follow that chevron. It'll give you the answer! And who's at the center? Onesimus. This is who it's about.

Who's he? He's the runaway slave. Onesimus did something against his owner, Philemon. We don't know what it was. Maybe he stole. Maybe running away was like stealing. Onesimus makes his way to Paul who's in prison. And in the process of spending time with Paul, Onesimus actually becomes a Christian and even an assistant to Paul.

But what is he to do about his past? How can he make it right? Philemon was well to do. He was a church leader in Colossae. He owned slaves. Paul's in a difficult situation. He'll ask Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus, but also to accept him as a brother in Christ because Onesimus is a changed man. So how do you write that up? How is Paul going to make lemonade from these lemons?

He starts by thanking Philemon for his faith and love—which never hurts to acknowledge a good example. He uses a key word in verse 6, *koinonia*. It means partnership, fellowship, joining in. Paul writes, "I pray that the *koinonia* or partnership that springs from your faith may effectively lead you to full knowledge of every good thing in Christ." *Koinonia* is to share in something,

mutually participate in it. For Paul, this means we share in the same grace, the same Jesus. Koinonia isn't just a nice thought, it's something that we do. So this is Paul's request. "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. [Onesimus means "useful" so watch this little play on words Paul gives us. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.). I'm sending him back to you. I could have kept him. But I wanted to give you an opportunity to acknowledge what God has done here. I want you to receive him as a brother.

And this is where Paul makes the move. He writes, "Philemon, if you're really a partner with me in the gospel, if you're really into this koinonia thing, then welcome Onesimus as you would me."

Philemon had every legal right to throw Onesimus in prison for what he did. Furthermore, Roman law provided little protection for slaves because they were regarded as property, not as people. Owners could mistreat their slaves and even kill them with little or no legal retaliation. The law specifically provided that owners could put runaway slaves to death - presumably as a warning to others. But Paul is not only asking him to forgive. He's asking Philemon to receive him as a brother in Christ, as an equal. The master-slave relationship no longer defines their relationship. Onesimus is now a beloved brother in the Lord. This means he

is a family member. He is a spiritual equal. This is way more than could ever be expected in social order. Paul's request is way outside the status quo.

"Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ" (v. 20). Why should Philemon do that?

Paul says, "And if he owes you anything, charge it to me, and I will repay you." Well, what did Onesimus owe Philemon? His very life! And Paul is saying to Philemon, "You are mine already, but I will give you my very life for Onesimus's sake." Paul is laying down his life for the sake of another. In this way, he is like Jesus.

Philemon is the only letter of Paul where he does not explicitly mention the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He doesn't need to explain the cross with words because he's showing us what the cross looks like. It is the paying of another's debt. It is interceding on behalf of another. It is recognizing that we have all received the same grace from God and so we are all equal before God. We have no other standing before God than what the cross gives us. Philemon is about reconciliation, intercession, and being equal before God.

The implications of this little itty bitty letter are huge and radical. Think about what this looks like for your relationships. It means **while the gospel is extremely personal, it is never private.** It causes us to look at every relationship

in a new light—including our own. In the family of Jesus, all are equal partners who share together in God’s healing mercy. This is why Paul’s very next letter from prison, Colossians, he can write this. “There is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. But Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11)

I find this message of equality—not only before God, but before each other—to be such a powerful message for our society. We see that because of Jesus, there’s no place for racism, or division along any of those social lines. Status and superiority...none of that applies in the kingdom. If we are partners in the gospel, if we have received mercy, how can we not give mercy. How can we not forgive another, when we realize how much we’ve been forgiven?

I was listening to the radio and caught this program on Family Life Today about marriages that were saved because of the gospel. I mean, these marriages were just at their end. This couple was extremely honest and vulnerable about their struggles. There wasn’t much hope. There was infidelity, there was exhaustion on both sides. Somewhere in the process, they became Christians. Not at the same time. But they both became believers. One asked for forgiveness. “If the Lord Jesus has forgiven me of my sins. How can I not forgive you of your sins?” And even in the retelling of the story, this couple is weeping into the

microphone because they realized how close they were to throwing it all away.

And yet, not only was their marriage saved, but their dignity was restored through the gospel of Jesus Christ. When grace is given, it's so refreshing. When we forgive, we restore people. We release them from their past and we open up to them the future where they can start fresh. This is the family business we're in. When we choose to give grace, it refreshes our hearts.

We are in the business of restoring dignity. Not because of anything we've done, but because of what Christ has done for us. The letter of Philemon reminds us that Christianity has the power to heal hurting hearts and to repair broken people, putting them back on their feet. It instructs us that when given the chance we are to participate in a revolutionary thing called grace and forgiveness, leading to reconciliation. We can stem the tide against cruelty and hatred by doing for others that Paul has asked Philemon to do for Onesimus.

So what happened to Onesimus? Did Philemon forgive him and receive him as a brother? I have a feeling he did; otherwise this letter would probably not be in the Bible. But there's something even more intriguing. About fifty years later, there's a church father named Ignatius of Antioch. He writes to the Ephesians who happen to have an excellent bishop; he was known for his love. His name was Onesimus. I can't prove it's the same guy, but wouldn't you think this is just

something God would do. Take a runaway slave, who deserved death, yet whose life was transformed by the gospel as Paul not only shared it, but showed it, and make that runaway slave into a bishop?

Yes, friends, God is that good that even when we give Him lemons, He still makes lemonade.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Head (what?)**

Where is Paul when he writes to Philemon?

Who was Onesimus and what did he do?

How did the identity of Onesimus change and how does that speak to our identity in Christ?

**Heart (so what?)**

Are you more hesitant or bold when it comes to asking favors?

What is your reaction when someone says they are praying for you?

What does it take to reestablish trust with someone who made a major mistake?

Does your heart need refreshment at this time? How does it get refreshed?

**Hands (now what?)**

What broken relationship or promise do you need to revisit and repair?

Is there any situation that you can help to facilitate reconciliation?

Who would benefit from a note of encouragement or affirmation from you?