

Paul's Appeal on Behalf of Onesimus

Philemon

Outline

- 1a | Authors: Paul & Timothy
- 1b-3 | Addressees: Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, house church
- 4-7 | Paul's love for Philemon
- 8-9 | Paul's request (command) to Philemon introduced
- 10-16 | Paul's plea for Philemon to receive Onesimus
- 17-20 | Paul offers to cover Onesimus' debt
- 21 | Paul's confidence in Philemon
- 22 | Paul's hope of visiting him soon
- 23-24 | Greetings from fellow workers with Paul
- 25 | Benediction

Reflections

Have you ever made a mistake and had someone help you fix your mistake or at least to bring closure and restoration to the situation? That is what Paul is doing in this letter.

This is a very personal letter that was sent by Paul to a friend in the city of Colossae, probably included with the letter to the church, Philemon. He also greets Apphia, probably his wife, and Archippus, probably his son, and the church that meets in Philemon's house.

Paul begins by commending Philemon because of his love for God and his hospitality to all believers. He then makes an appeal to him initially as a friend but, if he has to, as an apostle and the one who introduced him to Jesus—forgive Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave.

Paul doesn't deny that Onesimus made a mistake but his actions of late have been beneficial to Paul and who has since become a fellow believer. Onesimus' mistakes rendered him useless to Philemon but now he has proven himself to be an asset to Paul in his imprisonment. The appeal Paul makes is for Philemon to receive Onesimus back not only as a slave but more, as a fellow brother in Christ. Paul also promises to pay whatever debt Onesimus might have incurred.

Why does Paul do this? As people age, one of two things happen with regard to how they will to the world. They either become hardened and unrelenting or they become more forgiving and patient. Yes, these are extremes and there is a broad spectrum of potential responses people can have toward the world, but for the sake of this article, let's consider just the two.

In Paul's particular case, it appears that he has mellowed with age. Consider the context of verses 8 and 9, in which Paul describes himself as aged and a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Philemon 1:8-11 NASB Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, **9** yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— **10** I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, **11** who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

He is appealing on behalf of a fellow believer who had made a mistake. There is another example of Paul's mellowing with age that we can consider as well.

Paul and Barnabas had a disagreement over Barnabas' cousin John Mark (Acts 15:35-41), who had returned to Jerusalem early during their first missionary trip (Acts 13:13). When it came time for the pair to set out on their next trip, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance, Paul didn't, resulting in the duo splitting up and forming two missionary teams.

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However, later in life we find that Paul's attitude toward Mark had changed. Paul mentions him as being with him while writing to the church in Colossae and also in Philemon's letter. Additionally, in 2 Timothy, we find Paul requesting that Mark be sent to him while he is in prison.

[Colossians 4:10 NASB](#) Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and also [Barnabas's cousin Mark](#) (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him);

[Philemon 1:24 NASB](#) as do [Mark](#), Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

[2 Timothy 4:9-11 NASB](#) Make every effort to come to me soon; [10](#) for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. [11](#) Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.

Just like Onesimus had become useless to Philemon, Paul at one time regarded Mark useless and didn't want him traveling with him. But later in life, Mark had become useful to him, just like Onesimus could be useful to Philemon again.

Back to the original question, has anyone ever interceded for you, on your behalf, trying to bring reconciliation to a situation? If you are having a hard time thinking of a particular person who might have done this, I would like to suggest that we have all had One who has, Jesus.

In our sinful condition, we are/were useless to God, unable to represent Him to the world. But through Christ's willing sacrifice, we have been made clean, redeemed, and sanctified through the blood of Christ. Just like Paul who was willing to pay whatever debt Onesimus might have incurred, Jesus has paid the debt for our sins. Jesus now brings us back to the Father, and appeals to Him on our behalf and clothes us in His righteousness, offering us as useful again to the Father. Oh what joy it must be for God to see His children who had been in rebellion, returned to Him, to His glory and honor!

If you haven't yet chosen to place your faith in Jesus, the Savior of the world, choose to do so today while it is still today. Don't delay because we don't know what the day will bring or how long our life will be.

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son Jesus to pay the debt of our sins and restore us to a right relationship with You. Help us to be useful to You and as we seek to live to honor You. May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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