

philemon: a case study

Colossians 4:7–9 (ESV)

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)

32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Colossians 3:13 (ESV)

13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Philemon (ESV)

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker
2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and 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 always when I remember you in my prayers,
5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,
6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.
7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.
8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,
9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—

INTRODUCTION

- **Philemon** seems to have been a wealthy man, a slave owner (vv. 15, 16), who offered his house as a place of gathering for the believers in Colossae (see Col 4:8-9). Most likely, Philemon met Paul at Ephesus during Paul's ministry there (see Acts 19). Philemon had come to faith in Christ because of Paul's ministry, so Philemon would be considered a spiritual son of Paul.
- **Onesimus** was a slave of Philemon who ran away from his master at Colossae, after possibly committing theft (vv. 15, 16, 18, and 19). He found his way to Rome, where he encountered Paul, and was converted under his influence and ministry (v. 10). Like Philemon, Onesimus was also a spiritual son of Paul and Paul could make good use of him in his imprisonment, but would not do so without the consent of Philemon (vv. 13, 14), so he sends him back with this letter as a letter of recommendation in favor of him.
- **Onesimus** means "useful" and was very useful to Paul (vv. 11, 13) and Paul would have gladly kept him by his side. That Onesimus was willing to risk such punishment speaks of the genuineness of his faith. It was at great risk that Onesimus went back to Philemon: he could be crucified, he could be branded with an "F" on his head for being a fugitive, or beaten.
- **Paul** implores Philemon to put into principle what he is taught in Eph 4.32 and Col 3:13. He entreats Philemon to treat Onesimus as Christ treated him. This letter to Philemon was accompanied by letters to the Ephesians and to his church in Colossae by Tychicus and Onesimus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7-9) where many of the issues Paul alludes to in Philemon are dealt with in detail.
- **Counselors** should use both Ephesians and Colossians to teach the principles of forgiveness, unity and reconciliation.

READINESS: PHILEMON WAS READY TO RECONCILE (1-9)

Counselors should turn these into questions to help counselees assess whether they live ready to reconcile at any moment. Also, consider assignments that will help them develop such readiness.

1. He was devoted to the Lord (4-5a)
2. He was devoted to others (5b)
3. He was devoted to unity (6a)
4. He was devoted to obeying God's Word (6b)

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10 I appeal to you for my child,
Onesimus, whose father I became in my
imprisonment.

11 (Formerly he was useless to you, but
now he is indeed useful to you and to
me.)

12 I am sending him back to you, sending
my very heart.

13 I would have been glad to keep him
with me, in order that he might serve me
on your behalf during my imprisonment
for the gospel,

14 but I preferred to do nothing without
your consent in order that your goodness
might not be by compulsion but of your
own accord.

15 For this perhaps is why he was parted
from you for a while, that you might
have him back forever,

16 no longer as a bondservant but more
than a bondservant, as a beloved
brother—especially to me, but how
much more to you, both in the flesh and
in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me your partner,
receive him as you would receive me.

18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes
you anything, charge that to my account.

19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I
will repay it—to say nothing of your
owing me even your own self.²⁰ Yes,
brother, I want some benefit from you in
the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

21 Confident of your obedience, I write
to you, knowing that you will do even
more than I say.

22 At the same time, prepare a guest
room for me, for I am hoping that
through your prayers I will be graciously
given to you.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ
Jesus, sends greetings to you,

24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas,
and Luke, my fellow workers.

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

5. He was devoted to God's glory (6c)
6. He was devoted to blessing others (7)
7. He was devoted to what is right (8-9)

REPENTANCE: ONESIMUS WAS REPENTANT (10-11)

Counselors will want to assess the counselee's practice of repentance? Are they known for repenting? Do they know how to repent and what it looks like? Consider a review of Ps 51 and 2 Cor 7:10-11. Use these four characteristics to assess counselees.

1. He confessed his sin and need of a savior
2. He was aware of his condition before God
3. He was aware of his sin against Philemon
4. He turned from his sin and toward his savior

RECEPTION: PHILEMON WAS WILLING TO RECEIVE ONESIMUS (12-15)

Counselors must assess the willingness of the counselee to receive the offender. Do they say things like, "Forgiving him doesn't mean I have to speak to him, does it?" Humility and trust are key topics to teach.

1. He would forgive him personally (12a)
2. He would forgive him humbly (12b-13)
3. He would forgive him willfully (14)
4. He would forgive him trustingly (15)

RESTORATION: PHILEMON WAS WILLING TO RESTORE HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH ONESIMUS (15-17)

The topics of unity (Eph 4:1-3) and brotherly love (1 John 2:10, 3:10) are important to teach counselees. Another important element is teaching counselees about the Lord's instruction on prayer and having them practice praying accordingly, which includes connecting God's forgiveness of them to their forgiveness of others.

1. He took pleasure in the work of God (15)
2. He took pleasure in the fellowship of other believers (16)

RESTITUTION: PAUL WAS WILLING TO REPAY WHAT ONESIMUS HAD TAKEN FROM PHILEMON (17-18)

Repentance includes a willingness to accept all consequences (2 Cor 7:10-11).

REMEMBRANCE: PAUL CALLS ON PHILEMON TO REMEMBER THE REASONS FOR RECONCILIATION (19-25)

Counselors must connect the practice of reconciliation to doctrine. Every issue a counselee faces is a worship issue. Doctrine is truth and believers worship in truth and Spirit. Growing counselees will be captivated by doctrine due to their affection for both God and people. Pertinent doctrines to consider, but not limited to, are the doctrines of God, Jesus, man, salvation and the church.

1. He, like all believers, has been forgiven an unpayable debt (19)
2. He has an opportunity to be a blessing (20)
3. He has a responsibility to obey (21)
4. He is accountable to others (22-24)
5. He is graced by God (25)

RESOURCES

1. Jones, Robert (2012). *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
2. Sande, Ken. (1991). *The Peacemaker*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
3. Sande, Ken. (2002). *Peacemaking for Families*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale.
4. Scott, Stuart (2005). *Communication and Conflict Resolution*. Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing.
5. MacArthur, John (2012). *The Truth About Forgiveness*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.