

## Having Confidence

### Philemon 1-21

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, <sup>2</sup> to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God <sup>5</sup> because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. <sup>7</sup> I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, <sup>9</sup> yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. <sup>10</sup> I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup> I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. <sup>13</sup> I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <sup>14</sup> but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

On Friday – as part of my job at Goodwill – I am doing some research about human centered design. The concept is rather than participants jumping through hoops and meeting the requirements of an agency or organization, the agency or organization should adjust its services to meet the needs of the participant of the service. So, I sat in on a screening for a woman who was in a mandatory program, but was having challenges with a former roommate and now was depressed because the police had become involved. After explaining what she was experiencing to the screener, the woman was referred for counseling. In front of the participant the screener explained in non-judgmental terms, what the woman said and why she was being referred. A similar

situation is the subject of our scripture today. Paul requests assistance, and has confidence his requests will be met.

The letter to Philemon is a model of caring, loving, thoughtful, diplomatic, and carefully ministry. The situation is delicate, and Paul stands between two church members who are at serious odds, asking them not only to be reconciled to each other but also to model the new life in Christ to which the entire church is called.

Philemon is a wealthy man. He owns a slave (v. 16) and is master of a house large enough to accommodate a church (v. 2). He, his wife Apphia, and Archippus are the leaders of this congregation (vv. 1-2), and the entire community is invited to listen in as the apostle makes his request (v. 2). What has Onesimus done to Philemon? Did he simply run away? Verse 18 mentions both "injustice" (NRSV "wronged") and "debt" (NRSV "owes ... anything"); did Onesimus steal something from his master? Paul says only that Onesimus has found his way to Paul, who is in prison (v. 1), and has become a Christian through the agency of Paul's ministry (v. 10), even as Philemon himself once did (v. 19).

The letter begins, as all Paul's letters do, with a greeting from God (v. 3) that reminds Paul's listeners that he speaks not on his own authority but as an agent of the Lord Jesus Christ. Following the salutation is a thanksgiving in which Paul speaks directly to his reason for writing. Philemon's love and faith are well known among Christians (vv. 4-5), and the apostle prays that the partnership of Philemon's faith (v. 6; NRSV "sharing") might become still more well known among believers. Paul asks no small favor from Philemon in order to make effective that "knowledge of the good" (v. 6). He calls him to free a slave and forgive a debt, two things that could cause a wealthy man in antiquity to lose face.

Paul says he makes an appeal rather than a command (vv. 8-9) because of his love for Philemon. His repeated references to his own imprisonment (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23) serve to remind Philemon of the cost of Christian discipleship; he asks no more of Philemon than Christ asks of all believers. He also piles up images of the relationship he

and Philemon share. They are coworkers (v. 1) and partners (vv. 6, 17) in the gospel; Philemon is both Paul's brother (vv. 7, 20) and his son (v. 10). Philemon has hosted not only the church but the apostle as well (v. 7) and will soon have the opportunity again to show hospitality (v. 22). The apostle writes not only as a brother, but as the old person in the family (v. 9), a reminder that he was in Christ before Philemon was and thus has the superior family status and the right to ask what he does.

Peace between Philemon and Onesimus requires that the former receive the latter "no longer as a slave but ... a beloved brother" now that both are Christians (v. 16). This new kinship is "both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16), and Onesimus therefore now merits the same welcome in Philemon's home that Paul enjoys. It was considered extremely shameful in antiquity to enslave one's brother; so to call Onesimus a brother "in the flesh" forbids Philemon to hold him in bondage. Paul calls Philemon to renounce his privilege and be willing to suffer loss, both socially and economically. This is at the heart of Paul's ethical teaching: elsewhere he says, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:4-5). To give up his rights to collect a debt and punish a slave, Philemon must imitate Christ's own willingness to give up his "equality with God" (Phil. 2:6). It is also to imitate the apostle, who renounces his rights for the sake of the gospel that gives him those rights in the first place (1 Cor. 9:1-23). **E. Elizabeth**

### **Johnson**

Paul actually lives and practices a very deep ethical principle that he shares with our Lord: the principle of non-dominance. Jesus and Paul were very different men, yet each taught and embodied a refusal to dominate other people—even when they could easily do so—and a casual disregard for others' attempts to dominate them.

In this letter, Paul openly declined to dominate Philemon (vv. 8-9) although, as he told the latter, he well could do so. Paul dared to contemplate a wealthy Hellenistic Christian's receiving one who has been a disobedient slave as a spiritual equal, as a

brother, trusting Philemon not to fall back into the reigning patterns of prestige, discrimination, and violence that structured everyday life in those days.

This teaching of Paul and of our Lord is so radical that the church at large has as yet refused to pay it any attention. We routinely regard power structures in the church as normal and worry about matters of authority as though God does. Both Paul and our Lord did not. They are braver than we.

This letter offers three of Paul's challenges to us.

First, Paul challenges us to a novel twofold way of relating to people. He counsels us never to try to dominate another person. Even riskier, he counsels us to pay no attention to their attempts to dominate us.

Second, Paul's trust in God is so deep that he is able to discern the love of God in every circumstance, no matter how contrary—even in imprisonment, from which he writes as calmly as from a hotel penthouse. Imagine for a moment revisiting the catalog of *your* ills and misfortunes and discovering a loving gift concealed within each. That may sound Pollyannaish to you, but it is the discovered wisdom of humanity's most courageous teachers.

Third, Paul challenged Philemon to allow the Holy Spirit to take up residence within him and start moving the furniture. He trusted his friend to quit worrying about respectability, in favor of what was just and right. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to generously share and care on behalf of others.

None of that is for the timid! **Gray Temple**

Paul speaks of both men as Christian brothers and calls the stronger to release the weaker. This preference for the weak over the strong runs throughout the Bible, not only in Philemon. So also, Paul prevails on Philemon to honor the bonds that Christ has formed between him and Onesimus. **E. Elizabeth Johnson**

We might think of another story involving a runaway slave and a letter, the letter Huck Finn planned to send to Miss Watson—the letter that would turn in Jim who had run away when he learned that he might be sold downriver and separated forever from

his wife and children. The law and the mores of the time told Huck what he ought to do: he should restore Jim to his rightful owner. Huck even felt better after he drafted the letter to Miss Watson—until he began thinking about all he had been through with Jim, how Jim had cared for him and become a friend and like the kindly father Huck had never had. Huck then tore the letter up.

Imagine an illegal immigrant today. Say that it is José trying to earn money for his family back in Guatemala, or Rosa, now the single mother of children born in this country, but who herself entered the country illegally. There are reasons for laws dealing with illegal immigrants, and Christians are meant to be law-abiding citizens, yet, before all else, the immigrant is a sister or brother in the love of God. Gospel teaching and baptismal vows call Christians to respect the dignity of every human being. Imagine receiving a letter—one Christian community to another—commending reconciliation and care for Rosa.

So the story does go on, giving added significance to Paul's concluding words and prayer in his letter to Philemon: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

### **Frederick Borsch**

The language of brotherhood and sisterhood to describe the church results from Paul's use of the metaphor of adoption to describe baptism, which makes Philemon and Onesimus brothers (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5; cf. Eph. 1:5). Paul's letter to Philemon reminds us that we are not to use language of sisterhood and brotherhood lightly in our churches. The terms represent real and deep family ties; and we dare to have confidence that those ties allow us to make the difficult requests. **E. Elizabeth Johnson**

It is way past time for conservative Christians to recognize Paul's profound challenge to our immature moralizings aimed at other people. He would have none of it. It is also way past time for progressive Christians to recognize that Paul is far out ahead of us—and is not only braver than we are but more loving. Paul is God's gift to us. It is time we make his acquaintance and risk taking him up on his dares. **Gray Temple**

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Phil 1: 1-21

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In Christ, we are to overcome our social and economic differences and receive one another as brothers and sisters in Christ's service. Let it be so with each of us!

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