

# **Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle**

**More Than A Slave**

**Philemon 1-21**

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**Analysis by Bruce T. Martin**

Philemon 1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. 8For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9yet 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. 10I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15Perhaps this is the reason he was separated

from you from a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16no 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. 17So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21Confident in your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Prisoner of the Law**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Command Decision**

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, a Roman citizen had the legal right to put to death any member of his household, whether slave or free, for any reason. That was “the law” of Rome. Under the law, Philemon would be justified in killing Onesimus, his slave, especially if – as appears to be the case here (vv. 11, 18) – Onesimus had wronged his lord in some way. Paul even asserts his own hold over Philemon in the form of an unstated indebtedness; thus Paul’s “ownership” over Philemon (v. 19b). This, too, is a law or principle of reciprocity, and as such can be “commanded” (v. 8). Still, Paul would rather appeal to Philemon on the basis of love (v. 9) in order that Onesimus be received back as a “beloved brother . . . in the Lord” (v. 16). The question of who owns whom, and thus also of obedience can be answered either according to the law of reciprocity or according to faith in Christ. Paul takes the life-or-death risk that Philemon will answer according to active, “effective” faith (vv. 6, 17, 21), but as a back-up Paul also argues on legalistic, personal-moral grounds that Philemon “owes” Paul

(vv. 18, 19) – in this way compensating for any perceived wrong done by Onesimus.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Who is in Command?*

The question thus put to Philemon is, “Who is your warden? Who rules your heart?” Paul would like that answer to be “Christ the Lord” (which Paul may even expect, v. 21) but – to Paul’s dismay – it might just as well be Paul himself to whom Philemon believes he is indebted. To this extent, Philemon remains a prisoner to the flesh (v. 16), that is, to the law of give and take. Paul’s relentless argument to the contrary, that he and Philemon share a common ministry in the Lord (vv. 1, 5, 7), in part due to Onesimus (vv. 11, 13, 17), is designed to release Philemon from the “forced” (v. 14) law of slave and master in all its forms, including the more subtle personal-moral form of the law. Although Paul is not averse to making his own claim upon Philemon, albeit for the sake of Onesimus, that claim remains legalistic because it does not rely on the opposite claim of Christ.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *The Ultimate Warden*

Ultimately, the origin of the law of reciprocity, its true warden, is the God who demands justice – whether among slaves and masters, among close friends, or even between God and God’s creation (thus, the Golden Rule). The problem is, as this letter exemplifies, we are all ineluctably indebted to one another, and more so to God, not only for our lives but for the continuance of the gospel. The impulse to life implies indebtedness (even as suckling children, toward our mothers and thus also toward our mothers’ God), indebtedness implies slavery (which money never completely satisfies), slavery implies sin, and sin implies death. We cannot escape the God who made the law of reciprocity necessary for all living things, yet who simultaneously holds us responsible for every inevitable failure, most especially the

failure to trust in such a God. As regards the law of God (that is, God himself), we are sinners – slaves to sin – which leads to death (Rom 6:16-18; but see Gal 3:24).

## **PROGNOSIS: Free in Deed**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – A New Freedom**

Instead of remaining prisoners to the law of reciprocity, better to become, like Paul, a “prisoner of Christ Jesus” (vv. 1, 9) “for the gospel” (v. 13). This is a change in wardens, but what a change for us! Christ takes the consequence of the law of reciprocity upon himself without charging it to our account, and thereby ends the law. According to the law of God, we, not Jesus, should have been crucified. That would have been “right” under the law of reciprocity. But according to the Gospel-in the freedom of God alone-Jesus became a prisoner of sin in our place: the Innocent for the guilty. Our debt is paid in full by God himself! No more balancing of accounts, no more give and take. No more master and slave with accounts that are never balanced. No more accounts, period. As regards our relationship with God, our new warden has “flung wide the gates.” Now, the only question is, “Is the new warden trustworthy, and what does this mean for our other, still-bound-by-the-law relationships?”

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Freed for Life**

If, indeed, Philemon (like Paul, like Timothy, like Apphia, like Archippus, like us) is to believe that God-in-Christ has opened wide the gates of sin’s inescapable prison, then all relationships are suddenly and forever changed. As our Lord, (who redefines lordship now as servanthood-in-freedom), Christ is completely trustworthy, worthy of our faith. As our new warden-who-sets-us-free, Christ sets all of us (“saints,” vv. 5, 7) free. Freed for freedom! Freed from fear of the law’s endless curse; freed in faith to the One proven to be faithful (and therefore whose promises are true); freed for a new life

thriving in freedom. Death now is the blessed end of the law's reign, and the gateway to the true life of faith, that is, life thriving in God.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Benefits of Freedom***

The end of the law is not justice but faith active (or "effective," v. 6) in love. If Philemon trusts in Christ, the benefit of which is freedom in Christ, he will trust also in Paul, his brother-in-freedom (v. 16). If he trusts in Paul, he will trust also in Onesimus, Paul's brother-in-freedom (vv. 10-13). Philemon will no longer be constrained by the law of reciprocity, whether of Rome or of personal morality. Philemon benefits from the fraternal brotherhood of freed slaves (from the law), which includes Onesimus his brother in the Lord. Philemon is no longer constrained to do what is merely just (under any law), for he will freely do what is right under the gospel. For Onesimus is indeed now "more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16). Philemon will welcome Onesimus no longer as a slave, under the law of Rome, but as a brother of Christ and of all who trust in Christ. On this basis, Paul hopes that Philemon will make his faith "effective" (v. 6). Such "love" (v. 5) is "even more" (v. 21) than mere justice; it is the free "obedience" (v. 21). Paul trusts and expects this of Philemon as his "friend and co-worker" (v. 1) in the gospel.