

**The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.**

## **An Act of Love**

### **Philemon 4-14**

**Intro:** We're looking at Paul's personal letter to his beloved friend and fellow laborer, Philemon; a resident of Colosse and likely a convert of Paul's during his ministry in Ephesus. In this letter, Paul makes an important request of his good friend, a request that was unheard of in that time and in that society. The request is so outlandish, so potentially scandalous, that Paul must use great tact and politeness even though he's appealing to a good, close friend. This letter would accompany the letter Paul wrote to the church in Colosse so we can rightly assume they were written at the same time. In fact, the main focus of Paul's appeal to Philemon would come from the theology that is presented in the epistle to the Colossians. Paul's appeal will be based on how Christians should behave towards one another and not from any considerations of cultural norms or expectations of Roman law.

Before we continue with our study of this letter, we must address one more subject. In our present society, we have a hyper-sensitivity to any social institution perceived to be evil. Everyone recognizes that slavery, like the kind that was practiced in this country for multiple decades, was a terrible evil. Our independent nature as Americans is offended by the very idea of it and yet, it seems that in this letter, and some of his other epistles, Paul takes a very annoyingly blasé approach to the institution of slavery. Is this the case? Does the Bible approve of slavery, as some of its more recent detractors continue to accuse? This perception has caused many to reject the Bible completely, but is it truly warranted? Is even accurate? Of course not!

To expect Paul to take a stand against the institution of slavery is to make the mistake of reading our modern thought processes into the first century church. The issue of slavery would have looked quite different to the early Christians than it does to us in our modern Western culture and it would do so in 4 critical ways. 1) Slavery was an integral part of the social and economic world of the first century. In cities like Colosse, it's estimated that a 3<sup>rd</sup> of the population were slaves. Slaves served in all kinds of capacities, from manual labor, to household slaves who were trusted to run businesses and raise children, to high level positions such as doctors and other skilled professionals. Slavery was so much a part of that world, it likely escaped the

notice of early Christians who couldn't imagine any other alternative.

2) In that era, freedom or liberation was not the obvious good that it is for us in the modern world. 1<sup>st</sup> century slavery wasn't the forced subjugation of a certain race of people as existed in the antebellum South. While many people did become slaves by force (war), many others voluntarily sold themselves into slavery. Slaves came from all races and ethnic groups and they were spread over many different occupations and social classes. Also, legal freedom wasn't always a positive move for a slave. While the treatment they received from their owners varied greatly, all owners had good reason to treat their slaves tolerably well since they were an important economic investment. But, once set free, former slaves were on their own and often found it very difficult to make a living.

3) NT Christians were a tiny religious group living within an all-powerful, authoritarian empire. They had no power to influence government policy. In fact, they even lacked the very concepts of what we would call social action. It would only be a few years later that the early church would simply be trying to survive severe persecution from the Roman government. Just preaching the gospel was enough to make them targets of egotistical Caesars.

4) Most importantly, early Christians didn't see their divine calling in these terms. They simply rejoiced in their identity as the people of a new kingdom inaugurated by God through Jesus Christ. Of course, the old kingdom still existed, and would continue to until Jesus returned in glory. But, because they were in a new kingdom, NT Christians focused on creating an alternative society, one in which kingdom values could be lived out. Slavery wasn't going to be abolished any time soon (2K yrs); it was a reality that they had to live with. Thus, their focus was on encouraging Christians to realize, especially in their relationships with each other, that the new kingdom they existed in was ultimately what mattered and this new existence must now dictate the way they would relate to one another. So, if a Christian owned a slave, the highest duty that master could be called to was not to set the slave free but to love them with the self-giving love of Christ. Paul constantly calls Christian master to treat their slaves fairly and justly.

These reasons may not be enough to satisfy the most rabid of biblical detractors but they enlighten us to the mindset of the early church and the

real problems that they faced. Monday morning quarterbacking from a position of liberty in a free society cannot begin to address the realities of life in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. In fact, there is one truth that hasn't changed for all or our social advancements: there are worse things than being a slave. That may sound harsh to freedom loving ears but what has been the result of all our freedom? Yes, we're no longer under the thumb of an uncaring monarchy but how many Americans are still in bondage to sin? That type of bondage may not reveal any immediate dangers but it has eternal consequences. And just like the in 1<sup>st</sup> Century, that type of bondage can only be broken through the preaching of the gospel.

**4-7-** Paul must have spent a significant amount of time in prayer every day, giving thanks and interceding on behalf of all his churches, coworkers and supporters. Here, he tells Philemon that he prays for him often and he prays with thanksgiving to God. Clearly, Philemon had been such a blessing to him in the past to prompt these grateful prayers. Of course, Paul didn't pray long, intricate prayers for Philemon but he did often mention him in prayer and that would be encouragement enough for any believer. Paul goes on to tell Philemon how he prays for him and what the basis is for his thanksgiving to God for him. The "your" in your love and faith is singular and shows that Paul is directing his comments only to Philemon, who alone has the power to grant his request. But Paul's not just trying to soften up Philemon before hitting him up with his appeal. He normally offers congratulatory thanksgiving in his letters and his tribute to Philemon here is almost identical to his praise of the Colossians (**Col 1:4**).

The word order of **5** is significant. In the original Greek, there's a clear distinction made between the object of Philemon's love and faith. His faith is for the Lord Jesus and his love is for the saints. This word structure reveals how closely intertwined faith in Jesus and love for others really are. Faith in Christ is the impetus for love for others and together they make a whole Christian. Missing either faith in Christ or love for others renders any claim to be a Christian a deadly lie (**1 John 3:10**). Paul notes that Philemon's love is extended to all the saints, meaning he doesn't discriminate. This suggests he wouldn't exclude his love from slaves who are also in Christ; which gives Paul hope.

Paul now moves from thanksgiving in **v5** to an intercessory prayer in **v6**. Every epistle Paul has written contains verses that puzzle interpreters and

what Paul intends to say here is unclear. With our evangelical background, we might think sharing of your faith means Paul's praying for success in Philemon's evangelism or ministry work but that's not his intent. The word sharing is *koinonia*, which refers to sharing the same faith with other believers. Paul's speaking of the spiritual connection believers possess that springs from a common participation in the body of Christ. Shared faith in Christ has a bonding character and it welds us to others who share the same experience of faith. Paul is praying for Philemon to grow in the faith he shares with Paul and with others, including Onesimus. This shared faith will be the basis of his appeal.

The phrase become effective (or active) is made clearer: participation together in the faith becomes productive in promoting thorough knowledge – moral insight which knows what is important (**Col 1:9-10; 2:2**). But, here's the rub: for this knowledge to be worth anything, it must be acted upon, not simply possessed. Even today, the church knows and confesses what truth Paul declares in **Col 1:19-20**. But the church, whether 1<sup>st</sup> Century or modern, can only be the visible witness of Christ's reconciliation of the world to God if its members actively discern the will of God for their own lives and then apply it to their relationships with fellow Christians and fellow human beings.

In light of this, we might assume it to be a no-brainer that Philemon will make the right decision in this matter, but it wasn't that easy. There were several social factors that could sway his decision in the wrong direction. He would lose face in the community if he capitulates to a runaway slave. Not maybe; definitely. He was probably a figure of some standing in the wider Colossian society and he'll forfeit his standing if he becomes known as being soft on slavery. Also, he would have to bear the financial cost of freeing a slave and deal with the possibility of throwing his entire household into an uproar by his extreme leniency. The right decision will require an extraordinary exercise of faith, love and knowledge and Paul intends to trust the decision about Onesimus to Philemon's Christian moral insight.

**V7** provides the reason for Paul's thanksgiving and optimism. Philemon's past benevolence to fellow Christians shows him to be a man filled with Christian compassion. The verb tense in the original text refers to something he had done in the past that had lasting results. Also, his past generosity encourages Paul to make his bold request for Onesimus. In fact, Paul can rejoice because he is confident that someone who has shown such love and

brought such joy in the past would not refuse to grant his request, no matter how outlandish it may seem.

**8-9-** Paul prefaces his first reference to Onesimus by bringing up his boldness in Christ to command what ought to be done. Many commentators equate this boldness with Paul's authority as an apostle, as if he is being slightly passive aggressive by subtly asserting his apostolic authority by saying that he refrains from using it. Such a seemingly innocent statement would then contain a veiled threat: "Freely do as I ask; if not, I'll command you!" Paul would only be masking his apostolic position of authority behind a thin veil of politeness. He'd only be pretending to be a helpless petitioner and fully intends on lowering the boom if he is not obeyed.

This concept is wrong for 3 reasons: 1) bold is not synonymous with authority in the NT. It refers to outspokenness, courage or fearlessness. 2) Paul calls Philemon his partner and treats him as an equal. 3) Showing him an iron hand in a velvet glove of humility would severely undermine all of the politeness that Paul uses in order to avoid even the slightest hint of compulsion. Paul's not trying to turn down the screws on Philemon; he's actually taking the opposite approach. He's making it crystal clear that his request comes from one brother in Christ to another. Paul bends over backwards to avoid any hint of authoritarian pressure; he doesn't pull rank or issues any command but instead he humbly appeals and offers his personal financial guarantee as an equal partner (18). Paul doesn't want to coerce Philemon's decision in any way or box him into a corner so that he will lose face in granting his request.

Boldness refers to the right to speak freely, frankly and fearlessly, which any Christian can do. Paul's right to speak directly and to command what is right doesn't come from his apostolic office, it comes from being in Christ. Any Christian, apostle or not, minister or not, can tell a brother or sister in Christ to do what they ought to do. Of course, it helps if you know what they're supposed to do first and, that you speak to them in love. But if you see a fellow believer clearly heading down a wrong path, there's no wrong in pulling them aside and asking them what's up.

Now, some people will obey out of deference to the spiritual authority of the one who corrects them; some obey out of fear of divine punishment for failing to comply. But Paul would rather that Christians do what is good out of faith and love because they know it is the Christian thing to do. In the



same way, Paul doesn't make demands nor drop heavy-handed hints about what he wants Philemon to do. He wants his friend to do what is right but he will not command it because he wants Philemon to draw his own conclusions and make his own decision about what is fitting in Christ to do.

This is an important decision for Philemon because what was socially and culturally permissible for dealing with a runaway slave was directly at odds with what is fitting to do in Christ. A captured runaway slave could expect to receive anything from a brutal flogging to branding; from being sold to work on a farm, in the galleys of a ship or in a dangerous mine. They could also be crucified or thrown to the wild animals in the arena. Forgiveness was not the norm in Philemon's world but it's a fundamental requirement for Christians (**Col 3:12-14**). Paul wants to activate his Christian consciousness to make him aware of what is required of him to do in this situation. He expects Philemon, a Christian who's been renewed in the image of Christ, to show love and forgive Onesimus, just as Christ forgave him.

What's often overlooked in this scene is that Paul also expects Onesimus to act from love. Paul sends him back with a ringing endorsement but he has no guarantee that Philemon will honor it. He must be willing to graciously accept whatever his master might decide in this case, be it severe punishment or being sold to another master. Like the prodigal son returning home, Onesimus can only cast himself on the mercy of his master. Yes, they are now brothers in Christ, but brothers don't always act with love toward one another. Paul appeals for him confidently because of Philemon's previous acts of love but that doesn't automatically apply to Onesimus. He returns to his master because of love and can only hope he will be received in love

**10-12-** Paul finally comes to the heart of his request. Before making his actual appeal though, Paul smooths the way with 4 smart touches. 1) He lets Philemon know that Onesimus has become a Christian. What's interesting about **10** is that in the original text, the name Onesimus is the last word in the sentence. Paul doesn't mention his name until after he affirms that the runaway slave has become a Christian.

**2)** The father/son imagery used to convey this conversion reveals Paul's close relationship to Onesimus. He eases the tension further with a play on Onesimus' name, which means useful in Greek. In essence: "Useful, who was formerly useless to you has now become useful to you and to me." I'm

always down for a good pun but Paul takes the wordplay to a deeper level. The word unprofitable (achretos) and Christless (achristos) would have been pronounced exactly the same. Onesimus wasn't useful before because he was without Christ. But, when he became a Christian, he became useful (euchrestos). Now that he is in Christ, he has truly become Onesimus: useful. Philemon's runaway slave returns as the slave of Christ, having discovered his true identity.

**3)** Paul's careful to note that Onesimus had already been useful to him before sending him back to Philemon. As a prisoner, Paul needed others to take care of his needs, run errands and keep him company. Onesimus, as a professional servant, would have assisted in meeting these needs and, it's possible he possessed special skills that allowed him to offer Paul even greater service than performing menial chores. We can't know for sure but he was clearly a great help to Paul. As Paul saw it, Onesimus was representing Philemon in serving Paul in the gospel (13). In fact, Paul gives Philemon full credit for all this faithful labor. Onesimus had been acting for his master, who would only have been too happy to comfort his old friend, who was suffering for the gospel. Just as Philemon had refreshed the saints on numerous occasions, Onesimus, his slave, has refreshed Paul. Both have served others in the Lord.

**4)** Finally, Paul intensifies his request by calling Onesimus his own heart. Paul uses the term heart in all 3 sections of this letter. He's already praised Philemon for refreshing the hearts of the saints (7), no doubt referring to some act of love that lifted their spirits, and he can't imagine that Philemon will be callously indifferent to his own heart. In his conclusion, Paul will make still another pun with Onesimus' name: let me have joy (or some benefit [onaimen]) from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. He indirectly requests that Philemon refresh his heart as he had other believers and if that request involves any "financial generosity" on his part, he shouldn't penalize Onesimus for it.

The concept of refreshing the heart rarely appears in ancient literature, prompting some scholars to suggest that it was Paul that coined the phrase. It's use here in this letter highlights a very important feature of Christianity. While no other religions in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day didn't believe that refreshing the lives and encouraging the spirits of their fellow pagans was vital to their own piety, Paul's use of the phrase reflects his Christian conviction that all of one's actions as a believer should be directed

to the benefit of others. A Christian cannot afford to live only for themselves. If they try to, they will not do it successfully. If they are successful at it, then that is clear evidence that they are not a true, born-again Christian. To be a Christian, by definition, is to be like Christ and Jesus Christ was loving, forgiving and self-sacrificing. Everything He did was done in obedience to His Father and for the benefit of lost sinners. His people can do no less. 😊