

Bible Study: Letters of Paul
Central Presbyterian Church
December 21, 2025
Session 16/16: Philemon “Grace and Equality”
Reading: Philemon 1:8-21
English text taken from the Lexham English Bible
Greek text taken from SBLGNT (Society of Biblical Literature Greek New Testament)

Philemon 1:8–21: Paul’s Appeal for Onesimus

Macro-Context Letter:

Shortest Pauline epistle (335 words), written from prison (v.9), likely Rome (61–62 CE).

Recipients:

Philemon (wealthy Christian), Apphia, Archippus, and house church in Colossae (Col 4:17).

Occasion:

Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, fled (or sent?), met Paul, converted (v.10), now returning with letter.

Key Issue:

Slavery—Paul subverts without abolishing; brotherhood in Christ transforms relations.

Rhetoric:

Deliberative (persuasion via appeal, not command).

Verse 8

Greek:

Διό, πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνήκον,

LEB:

Therefore, although I have much boldness in Christ to command you to do what is proper,

Gloss:

| Διό | πολλὴν | ἐν | Χριστῷ | παρρησίαν | ἔχων | ἐπιτάσσειν | σοι | τὸ |
ἀνήκον |
| Therefore | much | in | Christ | boldness | having | to-command | you | the |
thing-fitting |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- Διό – Inferential; links to thanksgiving (vv.4–7).
- παρρησίαν...ἐπιτάσσειν – Boldness + infinitive: authority to command.
- τὸ ἀνήκον – Neuter; what is obligatory (moral duty).

Historical Context:

- Roman law: Master (dominus) had absolute power (patria potestas).

- Paul's status: Apostolic authority (Gal 1:1); could command.

Synthesis:

Paul acknowledges right to command but chooses appeal—strategic humility.

Verse 9

Greek:

διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτες νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ

LEB:

instead, I appeal to you because of love, since I am such a one as Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Gloss:

| διὰ | τὴν | ἀγάπην | μᾶλλον | παρακαλῶ | τοιοῦτος | ὢν | ὡς | Παῦλος |
πρεσβύτες | νυνὶ | δὲ | καὶ | δεσμιος | Χριστοῦ | Ἰησοῦ |
| because-of | the | love | rather | I-appeal | such | being | as | Paul | an-old-
man | now | and | also | prisoner | of-Christ | Jesus |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην – Causal; love (Philemon's? Paul's? communal?).
- μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ – Contrast; appeal over command.
- πρεσβύτες – “Elder” or “old man” (ambiguous; likely age ~60).
- δεσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ – Prisoner for Christ (not Rome).

Historical Context:

- Age respect: Greco-Roman culture honored elders.
- Prison: Paul's chains (1:13); rhetorical pathos.

Synthesis:

Love + vulnerability (age, chains) grounds appeal—emotional leverage.

Verse 10

Greek

παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς Ὀνήσιμον,

LEB:

I am appealing to you concerning my child whom I became the father of in my chains, Onesimus.

Gloss:

| παρακαλῶ | σε | περὶ | τοῦ | ἐμοῦ | τέκνου | ὃν | ἐγέννησα | ἐν | τοῖς |
δεσμοῖς | Ὀνήσιμον |
| I-appeal | you | concerning | the | of-me | child | whom | I-begot | in | the |
chains | Onesimus |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου – Family language; spiritual fatherhood.

- ὃν ἐγέννησα – Aorist; conversion (cf. 1 Cor 4:15).
- ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς – Prison birth.

Historical Context:

- Onesimus = “Useful” (common slave name).
- Fugitive?: Likely not (no punishment); sent by Philemon or sought Paul.

Synthesis:

Onesimus now Paul’s spiritual son—new identity in Christ.

Verse 11

Greek:

τόν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον,

LEB:

who once was useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me,

Gloss:

| τὸν | ποτέ | σοι | ἄχρηστον | νυνὶ | δὲ | σοὶ | καὶ | ἐμοὶ | εὐχρηστον |
 | The-one | once | to-you | useless | now | but | to-you | and | to-me | useful |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ποτέ...νυνὶ – Temporal contrast.
- ἄχρηστον / εὐχρηστον – Wordplay on Onesimus (“useful”).

Historical Context:

- Slave utility: Core value; useless = liability.
- Irony: Fugitive → useful brother.

Synthesis:

Name fulfilled: Onesimus lives up to identity in Christ.

Verse 12

Greek:

ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι αὐτόν, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·

LEB:

whom I have sent back to you, that is, my own heart, receive him.

Gloss:

| ὃν | ἀνέπεμψα | σὺ | δὲ | αὐτόν | τουτέστιν | τὰ | ἐμὰ | σπλάγχνα |
 προσλαβοῦ |
 | Whom | I-sent-back | you | and | him | that-is | the | of-me | inward-parts |
 receive |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἀνέπεμψα – Aorist; official return.
- σπλάγχνα – Heart/guts; deep affection (cf. v.7).
- προσλαβοῦ – Aorist imperative; receive as family.

Historical Context:

Slave return: Master's right to punish; Paul risks trust.

Synthesis:

Onesimus = Paul's heart—emotional stake.

Verse 13

Greek:

ὄν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,

LEB:

I wanted to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.

Gloss:

| ἐγὼ | ἐβουλόμην | πρὸς | ἑμαυτὸν | κατέχειν | ἵνα | ὑπὲρ | σοῦ | μοι |
διακονῇ | ἐν | τοῖς | δεσμοῖς | τοῦ | εὐαγγελίου |
| I | was-wishing | with | myself | to-keep | so-that | on-behalf-of | you | to-me
| he-might-serve | in | the | chains | of-the | gospel |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἐβουλόμην – Imperfect; ongoing desire.
- ὑπὲρ σοῦ – Substitution: Onesimus as Philemon's proxy.
- διακονῇ – Ministry (same as v.20).

Historical Context:

Patronage: Philemon likely funded Paul; Onesimus as substitute

Synthesis:

Onesimus serves Paul as Philemon's gift—partnership.

Verse 14

Greek:

χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ᾗ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον·

LEB:

But I wanted to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might not be as according to compulsion but according to willingness.

Gloss:

| χωρὶς | δὲ | τῆς | σῆς | γνώμης | οὐδὲν | ἠθέλησα | ποιῆσαι | ἵνα | μὴ | ὡς |
κατὰ | ἀνάγκην | τὸ | ἀγαθόν | σου | ᾗ | ἀλλὰ | κατὰ | ἐκούσιον |
| without | but | the | of-you | consent | nothing | I-wished | to-do | so-that |
not | as | according-to | compulsion | the | good | of-you | be | but |
according-to | voluntary |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- χωρὶς...γνώμης – Without your opinion.
- κατὰ ἐκούσιον – Free will (Stoic virtue).

Historical Context:

- Roman consent: Even masters needed social capital.
- Early church: Voluntary giving (2 Cor 9:7).

Synthesis:

No coercion—love must be free.

Verse 15

Greek:

τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὥραν ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς,

LEB:

For perhaps because of this he was separated from you for a time, in order that you might have him back forever,

Gloss:

| τάχα | γὰρ | διὰ | τοῦτο | ἐχωρίσθη | πρὸς | ὥραν | ἵνα | αἰώνιον | αὐτὸν | ἀπέχῃς |
| perhaps | for | because-of | this | he-was-separated | for | an-hour | so-that | eternally | him | you-might-have-back |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- τάχα γὰρ – Tentative: “perhaps” (rhetorical softness).
- ἐχωρίσθη – Divine passive: God’s providence.
- πρὸς ὥραν / αἰώνιον – Temporal contrast.

Historical Context:

Slave flight: Common; providential view (Joseph, Gen 50:20).

Synthesis:

Separation as divine plan—temporary loss, eternal gain.

Verse 16

Greek:

οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλὰ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσῳ δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

LEB:

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.

Gloss:

οὐκέτι	ὡς	δοῦλον	ἀλλὰ	ὑπὲρ	δοῦλον	ἀδελφὸν	ἀγαπητόν												
μάλιστα	ἐμοί	πόσῳ	δὲ	μᾶλλον	σοὶ	καὶ	ἐν	σαρκὶ	καὶ	ἐν	κυρίῳ								
no-longer	as	slave	but	above	slave	brother	beloved	especially	to-me	how-much	but	more	to-you	both	in	flesh	and	in	Lord

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- οὐκέτι...ἀλλὰ – Strong negation + elevation.
- ὑπὲρ δοῦλον – Superlative.

- ἐν σαρκὶ / ἐν κυρίῳ – Social + spiritual.

Historical Context:

- Slavery: No legal brother; church redefines.
- House church: Master/slave worship together.

Synthesis:

Onesimus now brother—in society and faith.

Verse 17

Greek:

Εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ.

LEB:

If therefore you consider me a partner, receive him as you would me.

Gloss:

| εἰ | οὖν | με | ἔχεις | κοινωνόν | προσλαβοῦ | αὐτὸν | ὡς | ἐμέ |
| if | therefore | me | you-have | partner | receive | him | as | me |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- κοινωνόν – Partner in gospel (v.6).
- προσλαβοῦ – Repeat v.12; imperative.

Historical Context:

Koinonia: Mutual support (Phil 1:5).

Synthesis:

Receive Onesimus as Paul—equal honor.

Verse 18

Greek:

εἰ δέ τι ἡδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα·

LEB:

But if he has wronged you in anything or owes you anything, charge this to me.

Gloss:

| εἰ | δέ | τι | ἡδίκησέν | σε | ἢ | ὀφείλει | τοῦτο | ἐμοὶ | ἐλλόγα |
| if | but | anything | he-wronged | you | or | owes | this | to-me | charge |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἡδίκησέν...ὀφείλει – Aorist; possible offense/debt.
- ἐλλόγα – Commercial term: “put on my account”.

Historical Context:

Slave theft: Common on flight; Paul assumes liability.

Synthesis:

Paul pays debt—substitutionary act.

Verse 19

Greek:

ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις.

LEB:

I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it, lest I mention to you that you owe me even your very self.

Gloss:

| ἐγὼ | Παῦλος | ἔγραψα | τῇ | ἐμῇ | χειρὶ | ἐγὼ | ἀποτίσω | ἵνα | μὴ | λέγω |
σοι | ὅτι | καὶ | σεαυτὸν | μοι | προσοφείλεις |
| I | Paul | wrote | with-the | my | hand | I | will-repay | so-that | not | I-say |
to-you | that | also | yourself | to-me | you-owe |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ – Autograph (cf. Gal 6:11).
- σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις – Philemon's conversion debt.

Historical Context:

Legal IOU: Binding in Roman law.

Synthesis:

Paul's personal guarantee + gentle reminder of gospel debt.

Verse 20

Greek:

ναί, ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

LEB:

Yes, brother, I will benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Gloss:

| ναί | ἀδελφέ | ἐγὼ | σου | ὀναίμην | ἐν | κυρίῳ | ἀνάπαυσόν | μου | τὰ |
σπλάγχνα | ἐν | Χριστῷ |
| Yes | brother | I | of-you | may-benefit | in | Lord | refresh | of-me | the |
heart | in | Christ |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ὀναίμην – Optative; wordplay on Onesimus.
- ἀνάπαυσόν – Imperative; echo v.7.

Historical Context:

Refreshment: Hospitality term.

Synthesis:

Onesimus as benefit—refresh Paul's heart.

Verse 21

Greek:

πεποιθὼς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ᾧ λέγω ποιήσεις.

LEB:

Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even beyond what I say.

Gloss:

| Πεποιθώς | τῇ | ὑπακοῇ | σου | ἔγραψά | σοι | εἰδώς | ὅτι | καὶ | ὑπὲρ | ἃ |
λέγω | ποιήσεις |
| Confident | in-the | obedience | of-you | I-wrote | to-you | knowing | that |
also | beyond | what | I-say | you-will-do |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- Πεποιθώς – Perfect; settled confidence.
- ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω – Implied manumission?.

Historical Context:

Obedience: Within household code (Col 3:18–4:1).

Synthesis:

Confidence in exceeding request—hint at freedom.

Summary Table

Verse	Rhetorical move	Key idea
8-9	Authority → Appeal	Love over command
10-11	Identity Shift	Useless → Useful brother
12-14	Emotional Appeal	Receive as Paul, freely
15-16	Providence	Eternal brother
17-19	Substitution	Paul pays, Philemon owes
20-21	Benefit & Confidence	Refresh + exceed

Theological Center:

Gospel redefines relationships—slave becomes brother, debt paid by grace, love transforms power.

Social Implication:

Subversion of slavery without rebellion—church as new family.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Paul's appeal reflect the gospel's transformative power?
- What does this letter teach about equality in Christ?
- How can we promote reconciliation and justice today?