

A STUDY OF THE PRISON EPISTLES

THE PROBLEM

2020 will likely go down as the worst calendar year of many people's lifetime. Amidst a world-wide pandemic, we saw people turn into factions spewing contempt on anyone who overtly or inadvertently disagreed with them. In 2020, a virus became political, politics divided the nation, and city streets were taken over as fires literally and metaphorically raged.

One such issue that boiled to the surface in 2020 was race. High profile tragedies like that of George Floyd, who died while in the custody of a Minneapolis police officer, brought the spotlight back on racial inequality in America. A history of slavery based on race has had consequences.

For all the turmoil of 2020, believers in Christ understand that all the unresolved issues are *not* ultimately sourced in race, politics, or any such thing. These problems have existed since the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. Although we should fight for the betterment of people, anything that doesn't cure sin only treats symptoms, not the disease.

PHILEMON 1-14

¹ From Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our dear friend and colaborer, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your house. ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶ I pray that the faith you share with us may deepen your understanding of every blessing that belongs to you in Christ. ⁷ I have had great joy and encouragement because of your love, for the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

⁸ So, although I have quite a lot of confidence in Christ and could command you to do what is proper, ⁹ I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—I, Paul, an old man and even now a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ I am appealing to you concerning my child, whose spiritual father I have become during my imprisonment, that is, Onesimus, ¹¹ who was formerly useless to you, but is now useful to you and me. ¹² I have sent him (who is my very heart) back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me so that he could serve me in your place during my imprisonment for the sake of the gospel.

¹⁴ However, without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your good deed would not be out of compulsion, but from your own willingness.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

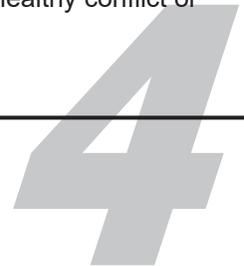
I don't know about you, but when I consider the weight of the hurt and suffering around me, I'm overwhelmed. When I consider the seemingly irreconcilable differences in people, I don't know where to begin.

Changing the world starts right here—with me. Politics won't save us. Social causes won't shape eternity. Only Christ can change lives, and he's called us as messengers (Matthew 28:19). Scan the QR code and start with you.



DISCUSSION

What does it look like to have healthy conflict or disagreements in the Church?



ICEBREAKER

OBSERVATION

1. How did Paul ID...(1) himself?
Timothy?
Philemon?
2. What else do we learn about Philemon? (2, 5, 7)
3. What was different about Onesimus as Paul sent him back? (11)

INTERPRETATION

4. Why might Paul have reminded Philemon of his track record (7), and how does this change how he should address Onesimus (11)?

APPLICATION

5. Do you have anything for which you need to seek or grant forgiveness? How does a relationship with Christ change how we handle this conflict?

The last year affected all of us differently. Maybe your life looks the same. But, maybe not. If you've dealt with hurt or frustration and need to learn about forgiveness, talk to your coach today.

STUDY NOTES TOWARD A SOLUTION

I'm not going to pretend we have all the answers to the complex problem of race relations in a modern context. What we offer is an eternal solution to an ancient source from the problems we face today. At the core of every problem and social ill is sin. The only cure for sin is the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. The truth of the gospel changes hurt into healing. It restores where sin tears down.

As we close out our study, we will end with the book of *Philemon*. *Philemon* speaks to so many relevant issues we face today that, for the Athlete's Study, it has been broken into two Weeks. Although *Philemon* only has one chapter, the weight of its message far exceeds its small size.

In our first two letters, Paul identified himself in different ways in each introduction. In *Philippians*, he identified as a servant, stressing the church's need for humility. In *Colossians*, he identified as "an apostle," stressing the church's need for authority. Unique to this letter, Paul introduced himself as **a prisoner for Christ Jesus**. This title stresses Paul's loving sacrifice for Christ toward others, including Philemon.

In addition to Paul's title, notice the use of the word "our" in the first three verses. This repetition indicates Paul's close association with Philemon. Paul reminds him that **God** is not just "Father" but "**our Father**." Paul and Philemon are believers, they share a common **faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints**. Thus, as Paul addresses a difficult conversation, he reminds Philemon of their shared foundation.

UNITY THROUGH WISE MEDIATION

We might imagine the church that **that meets in Philemon's house** got word, "Paul has sent letters from Rome!" However, as Philemon saw who brought the letters extreme emotions played through his soul. There, carrying Paul's letters, was Onesimus his runaway slave. Rage and hurt must have consumed him as Onesimus humbly approached, handing him a personal letter from the imprisoned apostle.

The church men and women could hardly stand to wait, they opened the letter we call *Colossians* and began reading. Philemon was reminded of Christ's supremacy. Then as they reached the end of the letter, Philemon heard that he has a greater Master in heaven. As a Christ-follower, Philemon had to respond wisely. His language must be measured and gracious.

Finishing *Colossians*, everyone looked to Philemon to read his letter aloud. Before addressing the real issue at stake, Paul recognized Philemon's great contributions. Paul prepared the ground for this leader to know and feel Paul's confidence in him. Perhaps the apostle sensed that Philemon's situation might test the Lord's instructions regarding slaves and masters (Colossians 3:22–4:1). Would love triumph over the hurt? If it worked in this situation, it could work anywhere.

WISE MEDIATORS APPEAL RATHER THAN COMPEL

Paul began addressing the problem between Onesimus and Philemon saying that, "**although I have quite a lot of confidence in Christ and could command you to do what is proper, I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.**" Paul wanted Philemon to grow in grace. That growth, that choice, cannot be forced on anyone. It must come from within as we yield to the Holy Spirit moving in our heart.

Paul cleverly played on the name "Onesimus" which means profitable or "useful." **Formerly**, he was **useless** (betraying his own name, "Onesimus") to Philemon. **But now**, as a fellow believer and brother in Christ, he is indeed **useful** ("Onesimus") both to Philemon and to Paul himself. However, Paul wanted Onesimus' companionship through Philemon's permission instead of a runaway.

Paul mediated for Onesimus—he stepped in the gap. We can speculate many reasons why he ran, but the main thing we need to recognize is the negative emotions this caused Philemon.

Before we insert our modern view that Philemon had no right to be hurt because slavery is evil, we need to put ourselves in that context. Although Paul didn't condemn the institution of slavery, he didn't condone it either. He simply acted within the institution (more on this next week).

Believers face hard situations and need to learn from Paul how to step in the gap for others. In Paul's example, he started by recognizing all the good Philemon has done. As a believer in Christ, that is a huge starting point. He acknowledged hurt, but appealed based on love. If your conflict is personal, seek someone to stand in the gap for you.

A lot of important and hard conversations need to happen in our world. Overlooking them is not an option. Remember, however, that our greatest struggles aren't on race or any social issues. The biggest problem is sin. The only cure is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. With Christ as our foundation, we can resolve any differences.