


**Philemon:**  
Useless to Useful

# TALKINGPOINTS WALKINGPOINTS

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**Talk** together about the glory of God's kingdom. –Psalm 145:11  
Love the Lord your God and **walk** in all his ways. –Joshua 22:5

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Pastor Doug showed that “the story of Jesus appeals to all kinds of people.”  
Who do you know who responded to Jesus as a scholar or as a homeless person or as a politician or as a child?

The gospel draws people from every walk of life—and it repels people from every walk of life! Explain this.

- What do the following verses teach about Paul's understanding of the debt Jesus had paid for him?  
Romans 3:24-25; 5:6-11; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 1:7

In what ways did Paul's offer to Philemon reflect this understanding?

- Read Ephesians 4:31-32. Is there anyone in your life whose debt you need to forgive, as Christ forgave yours?
- [**Onesimus**] sinned against [**Philemon**] while a non-believer. As a believer, [**Onesimus**] wanted to make things right. [**Paul**] intervened and took on himself the price of [**Onesimus**] sin.

In **your** life, whose name could replace Onesimus' in the sentences above?

**On behalf of whom** should your name replace Paul's in the sentences above?

- Who was one person God used to bring the good news to you?  
How would you treat that person if they visited your home now?

How do you think Philemon might have responded to Paul's request that Onesimus be welcomed in the same way?  
Why do you think that?

How does Paul's instruction to Philemon show his profound understanding of grace?

- From Ephesians 1:1-14, list all the blessings which are ours through our position “in Christ”?

To what degree does your daily attitude correspond to one who has been blessed this way?

If not, what might help you walk in gratitude?

## Sermon Summary (Key Text: Philemon)

Most of the mail in the ancient world was very personal. If you wanted to send a letter to someone, you found someone going in that general direction and asked them to take the letter with them. And then you sat back and waited, hoping that your letter made it safely across the raging seas, and robber-infested highways. In our day of email and overnight delivery, most of us would be frustrated by a system like that. And yet there were people who served as the Apostle Paul's mail carriers. The New Testament names Stephanos, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Tychicus, and Epaphroditus. The most important letter that Paul ever wrote, his letter he wrote to the church at Rome, was carried by a woman named Phoebe. These people are unheralded heroes of the faith. Had it not been for their faithfulness and dependability in carrying the mail, we might not have the New Testament we hold in our hands today.

There was a wealthy landowner in Colossae named Philemon whom Paul led to faith in Christ. Philemon became an avid follower of Christ and established a church that met in his home. The postman who delivered Paul's letter to Philemon was named Onesimus. He was a thief and a slave who'd run away from Philemon. The letter Onesimus carried to Philemon was about himself.

Slavery in the first century was very, very different from slavery in the nineteenth century. Now Onesimus didn't like being a slave. So one day Onesimus stole everything he could get his hands on and headed off to Rome. Rome was 1500 miles away, and no doubt Onesimus thought that in the anonymity of the crowd he could hide his past, his crimes, and his status as a runaway slave.

We don't know exactly how it happened, but somehow Onesimus met Paul, and Onesimus too became a follower of Christ. What Onesimus had done was a capital offense, but Paul told him he had to return. Paul sat down and wrote a letter to his friend Philemon. When Onesimus handed Philemon Paul's letter, he no doubt pointed out verse 10, where Paul wrote: "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment."

The name Onesimus means "useful." Paul is playing on the name. He is saying, "Before he wasn't 'onesimus', but now he really is Onesimus! Now he is useful, to you and to me!" Then, Paul added: "I know that he has wronged you. I know that he has stolen from you. But whatever he owes you, put that on my account. And when I come, I will pay for everything he has stolen" (v. 17-19).

This is an illustration of what the good news of Jesus Christ is all about, because what Paul did for Onesimus in paying a debt for him that Onesimus could not pay, that is exactly what Jesus Christ does for everyone who puts their trust in him. Jesus pays a debt to God and to his holiness that we cannot pay. I can imagine that after Philemon read the letter, he said to Onesimus, "Paul said that he would pay your debt, that is good enough for me. You can go back to your old quarters, and tomorrow you can go out in the fields with the other servants." But actually, Paul wrote: "If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me." (v. 17). And they accepted Onesimus just as they would their friend Paul.

When I met my future in-laws, they fed me, gave me the guest room, and gave me the run of the fridge! Why? Because they accepted me just as they did their beloved daughter, Susan. Everything they would do for Susan, they would do for me. Her position in the family became my position in the family. She was their daughter, I became their son.

Ephesians 1:5-6 says that, "God predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

When you come to place your trust in Christ, you are forgiven (just as Philemon forgave Onesimus). But there is more: you are accepted in Christ—God's beloved—just as Onesimus was.

## Digging Deeper in Your Daily Quiet Time

**Acts 15:26 mentions "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."  
Christianity can be dangerous—as Onesimus learned!  
Don't know much about the dangers inherent in following Christ? Let's learn about them...**

**Monday**— Aquila and Priscilla were a husband and wife team who assisted Paul in ministry.

- List all the things you learn about them from Romans 16:3–5.
- Now turn to Acts 18. In what city did Paul first meet them (v. 1-3)?
- When Paul decided to minister in the city of Ephesus, what did **they** do (see v. 18)?
- When Paul arrived in Ephesus, what happened to Aquila and Priscilla (see v. 19a)?
- Now do you see why Aquila and Priscilla were exceptional? Describe it in your own words.

**Tuesday**— Epaphroditus is another believer who "risked his life" in order to serve Paul.

- List all the things you learn about him Philippians 2:25–30.
- List all of the ways Epaphroditus is described in v. 25?
- Paul sent Epaphroditus back home to Philippi because **he** was concerned that **they** were worrying about **him** (v. 26)! Epaphroditus clearly was a "sensitive soldier of Christ" (v. 25).
- Now do you see why Epaphroditus was exceptional? Describe it in your own words.

**Wednesday**— Aquila, Priscilla, and Epaphroditus were exemplary—but were they exceptions?

- Read 2 Corinthians 11:23–28. List everything Paul suffered in order to serve the church.
- Acts 14:19 describes a failed execution! What did Paul do next (v. 20a)?
- Now read Acts 14:20b-22. Did Paul view his difficulties as limited to himself (see v. 22)?

**Thursday**— OK, maybe Aquila, Priscilla, Epaphroditus **and Paul** were exceptions?! Let's see...

- Read Luke 14:25–27. Are the words Jesus speaks in v. 25 aimed only at a select few?
- In v. 26, what must a person do in order to qualify as one of Jesus' followers?
- In v. 27, what must a person do in order to qualify as one of Jesus' followers?
- Do you wish to be—or consider that you already are—one of Christ's followers?
- Do you meet his criteria for being one of his followers? Give a few examples.

**Friday**— Read 1 Peter 2:18–23.

- Verse 19 calls us to "bear up under sorrows when we suffer unjustly"—just as Jesus did.
- Jesus is our model (v. 21). List everything you know about what Jesus endured for you.
- Describe a time when you suffered **for doing what was right** (v. 20).
- According to v. 23, what **didn't** Jesus do and what **did** he do?

**Saturday**— Now let's read Jesus' instructions to us in their larger context. Read Luke 14:25–35.

- According to v. 28, what must we do? According to v. 31-32, what must we do?
- If we don't "count the cost", what will happen (v. 29-30)?
- If we don't do what v. 33 says, what will happen (see the final four words of v. 26 & 27)?
- Do you wish to be—or consider that you already are—one of Christ's followers?
- Do you meet his criteria for being one of his followers? Give a few examples.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,  
and Timothy our brother.

To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker,  
and to Apphia our sister,  
and to Archippus our fellow soldier,  
and to the church in your house.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God, always making mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the full knowledge of every good thing which is in you for the sake of Christ. For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, my very heart, whom I intended to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel, but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but voluntarily. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, 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.

If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would accept me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ!

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. And at the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

