



DAILY FAITH PRACTICES

Sunday, September 4-10 (C) – Philemon 1-21

Focus: *Extending Grace to Others*

word of life

“I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.” (Philemon 6 NRSV)

Read Philemon 1-21

Philemon, the shortest book of the Bible, is composed of only 500 words and divided into 25 verses, of which 21 are read as part of this lectionary text. The setting of the letter is a jail in Rome where the Apostle Paul has befriended Onesimus, a runaway slave. According to the law, that meant Onesimus had robbed his master and left home with a piece of his master’s property – namely himself.

While swapping stories in prison with Onesimus, Paul discovers the owner of Onesimus is Philemon, a good friend of Paul, a leader in the church of Colossae, and someone whom Paul had encouraged in faith. A close friendship between the two prisoners develops which results in Onesimus becoming a believer in Christ. Paul describes the relationship like a father towards his loving child.

1. *Imagine that scene when Paul discovered Onesimus was running away from someone whom Paul knew and a Christian leader. Describe it.*
2. *How might Paul’s attitude towards his co-prisoner have changed after he realized this connection with Philemon?*

When Onesimus is ready to be discharged from jail, Paul sends a letter with Onesimus to his owner, Philemon. That letter is what is included in the Bible. Paul writes of his hope that Philemon will do the right thing towards this runaway slave who has already been punished for his crime. The letter is gripping as Paul describes letting go of Onesimus as like letting go of part of his own heart. “I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.” (Philemon 12 NRSV) Paul wants his new friend to stay with Paul and help him since his old friend Philemon cannot be there to be useful on a daily basis.

3. *What does Paul risk by sending Onesimus back to Philemon?*
4. *How might Philemon respond when he sees his runaway slave?*
5. *What treatment does Onesimus deserve from Philemon?*
6. *How might hearing of the close relationship between Paul and Onesimus soften Philemon?*

It is interesting to note that the name Onesimus in Greek means “useful.” And it is also interesting to note that as useful as Onesimus was to his master Philemon, he was every bit as useful to Paul himself. “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.” (Philemon 11 NRSV) When Onesimus ran away, he was no longer able to serve and be useful. But good came out of the jail time as Paul shared his faith in Christ with Onesimus.

“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might 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.” (Philemon 15-16 NRSV) If that doesn’t convince Philemon to forgive his slave, Paul reminds his old friend that he owes his very life to Paul. Thus, Paul appeals to Philemon’s compassionate side, but also lays on the guilt as well.

7. *How do you think Philemon responded to Paul’s letter?*
8. *Do you believe Philemon gave Onesimus his freedom? Why so?*

Word among us

Two strangers met in jail—one was a runaway slave and the other was a freed servant of Christ. They were linked by their connection to a man named Philemon. Perhaps it was an awkward moment when the two recognized their mutual acquaintance. For the runaway slave, the name of Philemon would have stirred up guilt and shame – for that was the name of his master. But for other, the mention of Philemon brought wonderfully rich memories of someone whom he personally mentored in faith.

1. *Describe an awkward time when you met someone with whom you shared a mutual acquaintance.*
2. *What are the challenges to view someone from a new perspective—especially when you know some negative things about that person?*

In this letter to his old friend Philemon, Paul put everything on the line for his new friend. He challenged his old friend to do what is right—not react from the old law, but live in the new covenant sealed by Christ. That meant to see his slave not as property, but as a brother in Christ. This appeal from Paul is quite radical. Paul both commands and begs Philemon to act graciously.

3. *Read through Philemon again. What verse is worthy to remember?*
4. *Why do you think this letter was included in the New Testament?*

As people of faith, we live between bold commands and the recognition of undeserved yet bountiful love, between law and grace, between duty and free choice, between claiming to be our own possession and living a life for others. We struggle daily with how to live faithfully, receiving God’s grace and extending it.

As we live between and behind the bars of the prisons of prejudice and stereotype which trap both the one who is judged and the one who judges, the bars which say that one person is more important than another, we strive to be true to the words we confess: that there is neither Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, black or white, young or old, but we are all one in Christ. We hear the appeal of St. Paul – refresh my heart in Christ.

faith practice in daily life

Proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed

The book of Philemon does not include a great flash. There are no loud crashes. No trumpets. No rush of mighty wind. This is simply a correspondence of living thankfully and gratefully with one another. It is a brief letter from one Christian to another, reminding one another of the wonderful grace of God, challenging one another to live out of grace, and suggesting a word of healing and forgiveness that can bring new life to both the one wronged and the one who did the wrong.

5. *Who do you need to forgive?*
6. *Who are you mentoring who might need guidance in extending grace towards others?*

Prayer

God of grace, extend your love to us and open our hearts towards each other. Help us to be bold in our requests of grace from one another. Amen

last word

Practice extending grace to others.

Daily Faith Practices

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